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Book 2 Recap

Zane Walker headed for San Francisco, where he took part in the Ventor Global Initiative: a summit of the world's strongest fighters.

To the surprise of all he more than held his own, breaking through to Level 100, conquering the combat trials of the Asura Hell Array, and even going toe-to-toe with top-tier World Rankers like the 'Touch of Death' Emeka Eze.

He also settled old grudges, taking down the dangerous gangster warlord Mike Masters, ruler of all of Southern California. By the end of it he'd established himself as the undisputed powerhouse of the west coast.

But for Zane, that was only the beginning.

He sought out new challenges—taking down catacomb dungeons in Los Angeles, settling a blood feud with his brother Jason, and journeying to the peaks of Mount Vesuvius to claim its fiery powers. With every power-up he came closer and closer to the Level 200s: the powerful next stage of cultivation known as Core Formation.

And just in time, too.

Earth's Integration was nearing its climax. Soon the final test would spawn: the apocalypse threat known only as the 'Superdungeon,' an ultimate dungeon that would show up after every A- and S-ranked dungeon was cleared.

And they would need to be cleared fast if Earth was to survive.

Zane, along with his girlfriend Reina and two other companions—the boy hero Evan Armstrong and the playful trickster Avery Lively—came together. They, and rest of Earth's top World Rankers, formed crews and tackled dungeon after dungeon. Zane's crew was even responsible for clearing one of Earth's two S-ranked dungeons: the dungeon at the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Along the way, Zane just kept growing stronger and stronger, eventually becoming one of the handful in contention for 'strongest man in the world.'

Unfortunately, tragedy struck at the other S-rank dungeon—the one atop Mount Everest…

When a World Ranker party—led by World #1 Irina Volkova—reached the peak, it was revealed that that peak was merely the entrance to the Superdungeon itself.

There they were greeted by a final guardian, a Monster like no-one had ever seen. The Monster Knight Asterion, a Level 350 Minotaur who crushed the entire party, easily cleaving even Irina Volkova in

two…

The gates of the Superdungeon opened behind Asterion. Unleashing Monsters of untold power onto Earth.

Which left only one man standing between Earth and certain destruction.

Zane was ready to answer the call. As it so happened, he was already on the verge of breaking through…

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191. Core (III)

Zane made his way to the Warrior Dojo. Irina Volkova's last stand was still stuck in his mind.

He saw how easily the Minotaur had crushed her. She hadn't been weak at all either. It just wasn't a fair fight.

That level of power… he had never seen anything like it. The Minotaur was labelled a 'Monster Knight.' He had never seen that either. It wasn't just any Level 255. It was the kind of Law, of Essence, of Bloodline that thing had. And it had spoken. He hadn't known Monsters could do that.

It was there to 'destroy the mightiest of the Earthlings.' That was what it said. That struck something deep within him.

He knew that was not Irina Volkova, strong as she was.

As far as Zane was concerned, that Monster had just sent him a naked challenge. And killed her as added insult. He had not known her. It wasn't like him to get worked up like this—even he didn't fully understand why he felt so heated. Something about the way it killed her… in a way that was meant for him, too…

He gritted his teeth.

In that moment he knew—his path and that Minotaur's would cross. Very, very soon.

And he would take that brute power head-on.

He was still stuck on it. He was thinking what would have happened if he was there instead of Irina. Setting the might of his body against its own… his heart. His soul. Said he could take it. He was burning to take it here and now.

In his mind he tried to see it as clearly as he could. And then… he was not sure.

He clenched his fists.

He had to get stronger.

Just to get in the door of the Superdungeon, he needed more.

He knew what he had to do.

He saw the Monsters running wild across the mountains too—they were all Core Beasts. A flood of S-ranked dungeon Bosses. You could count the number of people who could stop those things on one hand. And more kept coming—if they weren't stopped now, they would swallow continents. They would swallow everything. Reina would do her best to keep their own safe. But she would need him there too.

He walked into the lobby. Saw a dazed handful of folk standing

aimlessly, staring aimlessly. The white-haired receptionist greeted him, stammering—got quickly out of the way. He must have seen Zane was on a mission.

"Unless Reina, or Avery, or Evan is in imminent danger. Do not disturb me," he said. "Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes!"

He made his way up the private elevator. Stepped out into his cultivation room—bare bamboo walls, no distractions. The floor was a simple tatami mat. Essence poured in from pores in the walls, making a haze, as though surrounded by an early morning mist…

He sat down. Tapped his bag of holding, set some S-ranked Vials of Essence before him.

Took a deep breath. In, out. He had to settle himself a little. He couldn't do this angry, amped up.

It took longer than usual.

When he felt back to normal—normal enough—he drank deeply. And closed his eyes, letting it dissolve through him…

He sat there, and waited. Let it warm him down to his fingertips, felt a sense of burgeoning fullness, like he'd just finished a deeply satisfying meal…

A breath in, a breath out.

The fullness was spreading through him, flowing down his body—it had nowhere to go.

It started to collapse inward.

It was beginning.

Starting from the edges of his body, the fingers, the arms, the ear-tips, and toes, moving up, drawing in… essence slowly deserted his limbs. Drew ever-inward, and then he was in a terribly vulnerable position all of a sudden. But he had locked himself here for a reason.

He could not be disturbed. Things were growing critical.

A dot. A single glowing dot of essence, piercing bright, at the centermost part of his body.

Folds of essence began to smother it. Settling over it, over and over—wrapping it layer after layer… it felt like adding clay.

It was coming together naturally, every last sheet of essence winding further and further in. A slow, careful process.

…It looked kind of clumsy, now that he looked carefully at it. Each layer was done the same way. It kept leaving gaps in the middle—and when those gaps got wrapped over, it changed the structure of the Core. Leaving seams in the middle as it ran its natural course.

Zane frowned. …Was that supposed to happen? It looked ugly to him. It looked like weakness.

But it also felt like the natural thing to do was to let it finish its course—there was some greater power guiding the path, the way a

riverbed guides the river.

... Hmm.

Then again—why did he have to follow what nature wanted of him? He did not have to do what everyone else did. It bothered him.

He could fix this. He knew he had the tools.

He honed in on his forming Core and reached out with Emperor's Soul.

He tried directing the essence. Peeling it back, filling it in—

It didn't work that way, he instantly found out. He couldn't do it any more than he could force water to flow uphill… he'd have to blow up the whole thing if he wanted to start over. What was done was done—but he could still guide the shape of the future. He felt it.

So he set his mind to his essence, and tried.

He quickly discovered he was not very good at it.

It did not feel intuitive at all. It did not come easy to him, and it was a matter of the soul—he had never felt this before.

The first layer he tried packing on, he left more gaps than if he did nothing.

The second layer too.

Same with the third.

But he was frowning now, and too stubborn to give it up—he could feel he was getting better at least. And there were lots of layers to go.

He squeezed out a few more gaps from the fourth layer. And the fifth.

It would take about two dozen applications before what he was doing was on par with the natural way, if he had done nothing.

He kept going. One by one, like some sculptor packing on clay, trying to mold it just right. It was surprisingly draining on his soul—each layer took quite an effort.

If not for Emperor's Soul, and also his unusually large soul to begin with, there was no way he would've been able to keep this up.

But keep it up he did. And soon he began falling into a rhythm. Carefully, layer after layer… he fell into a kind of flow. Just him, and all that essence, and a slowly burgeoning Core. A Core getting better and better…

After a few dozen more layers, he felt he was getting pretty good at this stuff.

Another few dozen, and he wasn't leaving big gaps anymore. Only little ones. But they were still there—like those tiny air bubbles that got trapped in steel, making it just slightly less dense. But it'd add up over time. It would matter in the grand scheme.

He had to keep getting better. He kept stacking, and stacking, and stacking…

He had no clue how much time had passed in the real world. He didn't know he had the stamina to go for a while longer, soul-wise. He used less effort the more he did it too. He felt he could go a few more hours and was getting better at it. He wondered if it was some kind of new skill, or if he was just honing Emperor's Soul.

He got his answer pretty soon.

Skill learned!
Core Creation

Oh.

Each little fold yielded fewer and fewer bubbles too. Until he hit the last few layers—and found just one or two each layer.

Skill up!
Core Creation I -> II

That was the annoying thing. He could sense a real difference between almost perfect and perfect.

But that was it. He'd got it as best as he could.

The whole thing was starting to congeal now. To harden…

He was decently happy with it. The first third of those layers—not great. The second third was okay. The last third, especially once he leveled Core Creation to II, was close to perfect. Almost seamless.

He had to get it as good as he could, he knew—he felt the weight of the kind of task he was up against.

He needed as much strength as he could get.

As far as results went, though, there wasn't much he could have done he felt. This Skill was so specific. There was no way he could have trained it beforehand, not without actually doing it. He couldn't have done much better in one go.

The Core kept solidifying.

As it came together, he felt its growing density—it far surpassed the grade of those Bosses of the Deep Sea. He wasn't sure how it compared to the Minotaur. He wasn't there to feel it. But it had to be at least on par. Probably better. He doubted the Minotaur had the tools Zane did.

The only thing was… he wasn't sure whose Core was bigger. Who had more essence. Zane was always big for his level. But the Minotaur had 55 levels on him.

Hm.

Zane saw it sealing up.

It still bothered him. Something about this… it did not please his soul to have a Core that was not as pure, as dense, as it could be.

Core solidifying…
Grade: Superior

Then, on a whim, he had an idea.

He frowned deeper at it. Probed with Emperor's soul, dug deep to the very Core of that Core, to the starting thread of it—reached all the way in…

He felt where it all began. That little dot.

He couldn't turn back the course of the river. But could he start over?

If he pulled on that dot, it would be like pulling a thread on a sweater, he felt. It could all come undone—there would be consequences. A backlash… He wasn't sure how big. But he could do it. It would mean destroying everything, though.

It was just a matter of asking himself. Could he tolerate weakness within him? Or did he want to be the strongest?

Then the choice was easy.

He pulled hard. Just as the last of the essence was hardening.

It was not an easy thing—it had almost wholly solidified now. It resisted him. But once he forced it, gritting his teeth, it came quick. It felt like he set off a bomb inside himself. It didn't totally explode but there was a violent backlash of essence, breaking against the walls of his body, of his soul, before washing back—he spat out a mouthful of blood. It felt like his insides were burning.

He examined himself again.

His essence swirled about inside him, an upset sea… but it was all there. All the raw materials—he'd recollected them.

He waited to see if he would explode.

He did not explode.

He smiled.

Well, then.

He still felt unstable—his essence was still tipped over the edge. He was stranded between Level 199 and Level 200. There was no going back now, no time to recover his soul fatigue. He felt his essence start pulling in again, start congealing on that point—he could go again. He felt a little winded, that was all. He was confident he had another Core Formation inside him.

He started winding essence over essence. Layer after layer. He felt less like some pottery student slapping on clay now. More like a sculptor. There was a precision to how he wound it. Layer after layer—admitting only the littlest of gaps each time.

He fell back into that trance. Wielded his soul slowly, methodically… each time and nearly the same movement over and over and over—making little micro-adjustments—

It was excellent practice.

Skill up!
Core Creation II -> MAX

And now when he layered it on it came seamless. Not a single void, not a smidge of a gap.

The next layer molded perfectly to the first too, so you couldn't even tell them apart. And the one after that, and after that… the last third of the layers was a work of art. A solid, beautiful block of essence… it made a shocking amount of difference. Somehow when it came to the integrity of the thing, 98% and 99% were almost the same. But 99% and 100%, there was a world of difference. Zane found it hard to explain. He just saw it, felt it—perfect purity was something else…

Core Solidifying…
Grade: Peak

This essence was something else. He was certain the density was greater than the Minotaur's. Just the way it looked—so thick it was almost corporeal. So strong it was a blinding thread in the astral plane—you couldn't even make out the edges… he could only imagine how strong Skills powered by this would be.

Strangely, Zane was almost less happy with this one than the last one.

Probably because how close he was to perfect. He was right there.

He did feel kind of exhausted, though. He wasn't sure he had another Formation in him. It was almost perfect anyway. It would have to do.

He told himself this.

He told himself this again. It had to be better than the Cores of almost every Core creature alive already.

He thought about this being inside him. He thought about carrying those tiny weaknesses with him. About it stopping him from being the strongest he could be.

Was that who he was?

He hesitated. He groaned.

Grabbed that prime thread. And yanked.

He ended up bloody-mouthed, exhausted… with nothing.

For now. He spat the blood out of his mouth. His eyes went hard, bright.

One last try. For all the marbles.

He gave it everything he had.

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192. Core (IV)

18 hours later...

Reina stumbled back from one of the worst days she'd had in months. She'd had to pull three teams out of nearby dungeons, evacuate whole sub-Factions, manage all the teleportations and the resettling. She'd just finished getting the last of the emergency tents set up.

She was swaying a little on her feet, woozy by the time she came back home, bone-weary. She was ready to collapse right into Zane and relax at last and let herself drift off. She spent all her time taking other people's worries onto herself—making them feel safe. It was what she did.

She couldn't help but try to help people. And she couldn't help but take on their worries—sometimes she felt her heart was being slowly squeezed all the time. For a while she thought this was how life would always be. She felt like she could never take a breath.

Then she'd met Zane. She'd never felt anything like him before—he just had this presence to him… when she was with him all her worrying was like lightning hitting a grounding wire, dispersing, vanishing into the vastness of him, the steadfastness of him. He felt so solid to her. When she was in his arms it was hard not to feel like everything would be okay. He was there.

She started to smile just thinking of him. She was already feeling lighter, more relaxed just as she rounded the bend, came to their lovely home skyscraper—all wood blocks and vine.

But Zane wasn't there.

She found his note.

He was still breaking through.

Was it meant to take this long? She didn't know—no one had done it before... she bit her lip, pulled her knees up to her chest as she looked out the window at the Warrior Dojo, a solemn sleek stone block cut out against the darkening sky.

"Zane…" she whispered.

She tried sleeping—it wasn't like she could do anything for him now, she told herself. She should sleep. When she woke up it'd all be done. She knew he'd pull through.

But exhausted as she was, she just couldn't do it. So she sighed, curled up, stared out the grand bay windows, and hoped.

***

Base Camp
Deep in the Himalayas

Base Camp was under siege.

A horde of dozens of Core Monsters circled up its slopes from all sides, trying to get at the teleporters within.

And hundreds of the world's finest held the peak. Just as they'd done for nearly a half-day now.

On the Northwestern Flank, a Level 209 Orc Chieftain was bellowing, stumbling up the snowdrifts, dozens of wounds littering its body.

But a barrier of stone and earth stopped it cold—a shifting living wall held up by a hundred Mages. Mages of the 'Lords of Zuma,' the dominant African Faction. Nearly a third of them World Rankers—they wore necklaces, earrings of earthen runed amulets, making a firm formation.

"Hold!" bellowed the bald, muscular Archmage at the fore. They chanted their spells; new stone crusted over the wall, giving it another layer, then another, constantly strengthening...

The Orc Chieftain spat a waterfall of spittle, stared it down with beady red eyes, raised a battering ram of a club—Laws of Earth and Wood flared down its length, giving it the weight of a small mountain…

It clubbed the barrier. It spared none of its tremendous might.

Cracks rippled down the barrier's length. Whole strata of stone shattered, crumbled to dust. Mages screamed. But once the wall stopped shaking, it held—though it was split down the middle with huge smoking fissures.

The Chieftain snorted, started to recharge—and a volley of spells lobbed over the wall, showering over it. Opening up hundreds of little nicks over its massive body, cutting clawlike wounds over its bulging green muscles. Each one didn't do much. But thrown over nearly half an hour, bleeding it dry, stabbing poisons through its blood—they started adding up.

The Chieftain swayed a little, as though drunk. But it was far from done. Drained, dazed—that was all. Growling, it made to give the barrier another go.

Then the walls opened up.

A single man stepped out, clad in armor of night-black steel. A big man but he carried his bulk well. He gave the impression that every step, every move he made, came precisely. Exactly as he meant it.

He carried a mass of internal wounds from the past several hours of fighting—wounds that had not had time to heal. He was bleeding

badly under a mummy's worth of bandages and gauzes, hidden well under the armor. You would not know it from how he moved.

Emeka Eze stared down the Monster. And burned his Golden Lion Godbeast Bloodline—all three drops of it.

His aura erupted.

A Golden Lion manifested overhead, an avatar of the great beast, translucent, faintly flashing, roaring even as he narrowed his eyes…

He stepped in, pupils blazing purple. Reading the flows of Fate—flows he'd gathered after carefully observing the Monster all this time. When it swung for his head he was already ducking, bolting inside, fists flashing, one-two, falling upon its belly like dark meteors—two Seismic blasts. Rippling that thick belly violently—you could see precisely where he'd struck; they were the epicenters of the earthquakes rampaging through its bulky body.

The Chieftain's eyes bulged wide. It choked on its own spewing blood. It stumbled back, off-balance. And the Touch of Death found his opening. He delivered the finishing blow. A smooth, ordinary punch—

BANG.

He stood there for a moment over his fallen enemy, breathing heavy.

Then produced a handkerchief, wiped off the splotch of blood on his gauntlet. His own blood, bleeding out of his forehead bandages. And strode back toward his lines.

"That should be the last of them," said Eze. "This wave, at least. Hold strong. It will not be long now."

"It's been half a day, my Lord," gasped his second-in-command, Ade. World Rank #22—he was a bald mage at the head of the Formation, wielding a gnarled steel staff. His thick brow was marred with deep furrows. "That past hour cost us nine more battle-mages of the Elite Battalion. Zane Walker has not shown his face. And the waves are only growing in power—"

"He will come," said Eze simply.

"My Lord," said Ade. He paused, like he was wondering how to phrase it most sensitively. "He… must have seen how that creature crushed the Ice Queen… even brave men could lose their nerve."

To that Eze just let out a grunt. "The sun will sooner rise in the west, than Zane Walker lose his nerve. He'll come."

***

On the southeast flank of Base Camp, a great Blizzard was raging. And a top World Ranker raged within it.

Vanessa Volkova had lost her mind.

She had been unleashing for six hours straight, the point of the

spear that was the North Star Faction's army. Even the other top World Rankers fighting beside her watched on in awe—she speared a Core Imp with an icicle as big as a torpedo—it exploded in thousands of tiny fractal shards, shredding throats and eyes; she rained another, then another, and another, screaming in fury—

She unleashed hell over the Monster horde.

No one knew where she was pulling this power from. Even Alexey Tarakanovich, Deputy Faction Head of the North Star Faction, had never seen anything like it—he hadn't known she could do that. And he was her uncle. He had known her his whole life.

Vanessa's eyes had gone pure white. Shining. Like she was channeling some otherworldly power. She gave off an immense aura, an untouchable feeling; in that moment she could have been mistaken for her mother.

Then—around the seven-hour mark—she started to tremble. To waver. The Blizzard started listing on one side.

She closed her eyes. Shuddered. The blinding light was fading from her face, showing the dark tear-trails staining her cheeks.

She swayed one last time, and dropped straight out of the sky. She had blacked out long before she hit the ground—burned herself out.

Alexey gave a shout, summoned a stiff gust of winter wind, bearing her to safety.

"Your mother would be proud," he said to her fallen body. She had bought them crucial time.

They could only hope it would be enough.

***

Zane melded a layer over that first spark of core. Seamless.

One.

Another. Two. Three. Layer after layer following the same motion—a motion he had honed, perfected, through so many brutal tries…

Four. Five.

He was moving now with an intensity, a focus, he'd never felt—it was like his whole soul, his whole mind, was bearing down on this one act.

The only thing that could undo him now was fatigue. He wasn't sure how long he'd been at it. Stamina had never been an issue for him in anything he did—so much so he never thought about it. But now it was creeping in, dragging him back—not in big ways yet. But in little subtle tugs. Trying to muddle his attention. Trying to skew his layering, to make him indulge the slightest careless mistake…

Zane growled. Tiredness was another enemy in his way—that was all. It would not defeat him.

Six. Seven. Eight.

No one layer was particularly difficult. It was the consistency again,

and again, and again… the undivided attention he needed to stay perfect for such a long time. One slip-up and all was lost.

One slip-up and he might not even have a Core. If he cracked even a little, that rising tide of fatigue would sweep him through. And that would be it.

He had to hold on with an iron grip.

A dozen layers. Another dozen. Another dozen.

It hadn't even solidified yet and he could already feel the difference between weakness and no weakness. That essence… that density… it was hard to believe that was even essence.

And it kept building… building…

One hundred layers. Three hundred. Six hundred. He kept pushing.

Hours passed.

One thousand five hundred. He layered it on with care. Melded it firmly to that shining mass.

It was starting to take shape.

Two thousand. He was more than halfway done now—it didn't much matter to him. He was not thinking of progress. Nor how long until he was done. The only thing on his mind was this moment, this layer… getting it exactly right.

By now the fatigue was an anchor dragging down his whole soul… it had moved far past little slip-ups. It was a grueling fight just to stay awake.

It was a matter of sheer will.

Two thousand five hundred.

Three thousand. He forced his way through. And now his body was trembling, head to toe—his nerve endings felt raw. Every instinct was trying to convince him he couldn't take it anymore.

Zane did not care.

There was a job to be done. And he would see it through.

Again. Again. Again. A constant drumbeat in his soul. Sculpting his greatest work.

He was sculpting himself.

His Core was a reflection of himself. It was who he was—it was, in a literal way, his very core.

Zane was absolute strength. That was the quality he most identified with. He held himself to that standard in all things.

It would hold to his Core too.

Five more layers. He powered his way to the finish.

Four.

Three.

Two.

He laid that final layer with as much care as he did every other.

And at last—

There it was.

Core solidifying…
Grade: Seamless

He had achieved a total solidness. A denseness beyond matter—he saw it in the astral plane, a color so bright its aura washed out like the sun—giving everything around it a different color. Making all the rest bask in its power.

It was big. It was strong. Endlessly dense. A vast reservoir of power. He felt a resonance with it—somehow it felt like him.

It felt right—at last.

He let himself stay there. Letting his satisfaction sit warm in his chest.

He'd done it.

He smiled.

Then he stood. Blinked.

Suddenly he was tired out of his mind. Bone-weary. He was ready to go home and collapse right into Reina and drift off. He knew she would take care of him. When he was in her arms it was hard not to feel like everything would be okay.

He wandered out into the lobby as though in a dream, barely there—it turned out Reina was right outside waiting for him. He blinked blearily.

The moment she saw him she lit up with relief, with joy.

He deposited his body in her care and blacked out.

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193. Core (V)

He woke to a notification.

Level up!
Essence Level 200.

He felt his Core instantly. A sphere of shining light—more in the Astral plane than in the physical, but he felt it. Tied deeply to his body. All his essence flowed through it the way his blood flowed through his heart.

And this heart pumped strong. It was hard to look at straight-on. It took a moment to adjust. Essence was lifeblood, an expression of the soul. Everything it touched grew stronger.

His body felt new, like he'd traded up some beat-up old car for the latest model. A new engine ran inside of him, pumped through every fiber of his being, refreshing him. Imbuing him with untold strength, untold vigor. He could feel it whirring softly, dormant now—but ready to flare at a moment's notice.

He marveled at it.

He lay there waiting for a Class evolution. They'd come before at 50, 100… none now, though.

Somehow he got the feeling one was coming pretty soon. They seemed to happen at clean numbers. 250, maybe?

Slowly the world filtered in around him. He felt like everything was light, weightless, like he'd been dreaming. He blinked dumbly for a few seconds. He'd really done a number on his soul back there.

He felt fine right now though.

Better than fine. Totally relaxed, like he'd been through a deep-tissue massage for the soul. A warmth washed gently over him, wrapping him up. Someone was pouring warmth into him, pouring essence—he knew who it was. He could feel her tender feelings for him, her worry too, coming through clear. Whenever Reina healed him it felt like their souls were very close.

He found himself in a familiar spot. It was getting to be one of his favorite spots.

His head lay on her soft lap. Her soft hands were on his chest. Her own ample chest pressed gently over his face. She was cradling him in her softness, doing her best to take care of him. She smelled good, like wildflowers and fresh grass.

He really did not want to move right now.

But he knew he had to go. He had a job to do.

Reluctantly, he sat up.

Reina's healing had gotten quite good. He'd battered himself in that breakthrough—he felt fresh, though, other than the exhaustion in his soul. Her own breakthroughs were paying off.

He wondered how it'd feel in battle.

She gave a relieved smile when he woke—a very pretty one, lighting up her big almond eyes. It hadn't been long since he blacked out apparently. Just an hour. She didn't need to ask him how it went. She knew. She said she could feel that new vigor in his body too. It was like nothing she'd ever felt—she barely had to do any bodily healing. She spent most of her time on his soul.

She quickly got him up to speed. Avery and Evan had already gone out to help with the defense. They'd powered up a lot too since their last outing. And they were like Reina in the sense that they had a strong sense of right and wrong. Justice, that kind of thing.

Of all of them only Zane didn't have that strong sense, now that he thought about it. He mostly just wanted to fight. But he knew if Reina heard him say that she'd disagree. She was always biased when it came to him. She always told him she liked him first and foremost because he had a 'big heart'. Zane always found this pretty dubious. He didn't even know what that meant.

She was still holding him. She could tell what he was thinking.

"You're going for that Monster Knight."

Zane nodded.

He felt an old heat starting to simmer in his chest. He was thinking about the Monster with the black axe. It had come to challenge him in his own home. It had broken down the doors. And sat there brazenly. Waiting.

It was time to answer that challenge.

Zane told her he was going to destroy it. He was firm on it.

She was quiet for a bit. He could feel how intensely worried she was. She was thinking about how that thing had crushed Irina Volkova. It shook her badly—she was scared it could happen to him—she'd probably imagined it, against her will, a lot these past few hours.

But in the end her belief in him overwhelmed the feeling, like it always did.

She had this faith in him even he didn't really get. She knew he could be hurt. But she just didn't believe, to the core of her being, that he could ever be beaten.

She was such a reasonable person most of the time—that might be the least logical thing she believed. Zane was pretty sure he could lose. Really for her it was just a matter of unshakeable faith in him.

Still. It was nice to be believed in.

She hesitated—but she nodded. She knew he had a duty. There was a fierceness in her eyes.

"I'm going with you," she said firmly.

He gave her a kiss.

They set off together for the Superdungeon's First Gate.

***

Base Camp
Himalayas

For the past three hours, the best humanity had to offer were being pressed into an ever-shrinking circle. Faster and faster.

They had fought all through the dead of night. All through the twilight hours... it was still dark out, and there was no sign day was coming anytime soon. Raging fires made most of the light. No one there could remember the last time they slept. Heavens knew they needed it.

On the southeast front, Vanessa Volkova was still down. She hadn't woken from her coma. Her Faction, the North Star Faction—one of the strongest in the world, fielding a formidable hundred-World-Ranker army—was fast dwindling without her. They'd mount huge blizzards, pooling all their powers, to shove the Monster hordes down the slopes—with each passing wave, those blizzards shrank and shrank. Lost ground.

In the Northwest, the African army was slowly wearing down too. Their fighters were dropping, their earthen walls cracking. All the human forces were starting to coalesce in one tight circle. Their front grew so close they were almost linking arms.

In the Northeast, the Japanese forces were led by the Sky Painter Yuki Urabe, World Rank #6, the youngest World Ranker—and some said among the most talented. He was painting frescoes mid-air; some colorful winds, drawing open deep chasms in the earth, painting Monster bosses into his grisly paintings, then making those paintings come to brutal life.

He did it all with one arm, panting hard. He had been flowing through everything at the start—but now he'd long lost the illusion of effortlessness. His long dark hair was matted with his own blood.

Cristina Dos Santos, World Rank #7, shored up the south along with her militia. She was a human armory. Her body could have been 10,000 samurai swords, every point sharpened to a killing edge. In close combat, she wielded Laws of Razor Winds, Wind and Steel fused—her Sabretooth Godbeast Bloodline gave her the power to fatally wound even Core bosses. But she was badly wounded too, hobbling on one leg—the other was blackened with poisons. Her warriors filled in

the gap, throwing tornadoes down the slopes, trying to buy her time to recover...

The Spitfire Monk, Jian Shi Ming, stood side by side with his Temple monks—all of them clad in bloodied robes, wielding flaming staffs. He was carved so bloody he was more red than pink, but he was laughing defiantly despite it all, slapping his big belly, clenching his flaming fists. "Is that all you've got?!" he roared to a pair of Blood Imps.

But it was bluster. As it was, he would not last the hour.

Base Camp was the critical battleground, a nexus of powerful teleportation portals—portals that could jump continents. If they lost this, they lost their one back door into this chunk of the world—they could no longer shuttle in fighters and mount a good defense. It was effectively an open doorway to Asia, Europe, and Africa if the Monsters captured it. They had no doubt if Base Camp fell, Eastern Europe, Northern Africa and the Tibetan plateau would fall soon after. This was the domino which could not be allowed to fall.

Yet it was looking like it would fall any moment.

Humanity's best were simply not enough. They were failing, one by one. Even as they tried desperately, throwing themselves against the endless tides of Monsters…

***

Monster horde crept up the slopes, slobbering, cackling, rumbling. This time they came for everything.

This time they came to break humanity for good.

There were the Orc Chieftains, titans of brute power with skin like max-grade Spirit Steel. And the Dire Trolls, three-headed, six-armed versions of already horrific Trolls—some awful, evolved form. They moved and fought like apes. They wielded venomous Laws that blackened the limbs of all they touched.

Then there were the Blood Imps, fangs glistening. They had Laws of Blood Parasite, a grotesque fusion of Wood and Water. When they opened their mouths they called dark gales, sucking in life-force from all those in front of them.

Each of the Monsters had a certain nature, a certain aura. It radiated from their Cores. The Orc Chieftain was overbearing—it exuded a sense of grossness, bluntness, crudeness.

The Dire Trolls gave off chaos and fervor and frenzy.

The Blood Imps radiated greed, a sense of springiness, explosion, trickery...

But most of all—like all Monsters—their Core auras gave off waves of pure hatred.

Just standing in their presence, having all of those feelings crash down on them, hour after hour... it exhausted them. It drowned them.

Their spirits were breaking along with their bodies. Even the top World Rankers, the leaders, were having trouble holding it together. The Spitfire Monk put up an irreverent face, but you could see flashes of despair trickling in... Dos Santos staggered more and more with each blast... the prodigy Yuki hung his bloody head low, his hair cloaking his eyes. Hour after hour of siege, of being swamped in that awful aura, did brutal things to the mind. The only one not showing signs of cracking was Eze. But that in itself was a sign. His face grew more and more stoic. His mouth set in grimmer and grimmer lines...

“Forgive me. But we must consider retreating, my Lord," gasped Ade. His second-in-command looked ready to drop. Eze had sharply rebuked him for even suggesting it a few hours ago. Now, he was silent.

"The Japanese and the Brazilians agree—they’ve urged me to try to convince you. Perhaps... perhaps it is necessary to admit when we’ve lost. Gather our strength for the morrow. We simply lack the firepower... if there comes another wave like that one, I’m not certain..."

He trailed off. Eze was not looking at him—his Lord was watching the horizon. Dark circles trailed under his eyes.

The sky was starting to lighten.

Eze stood there still. Like he was waiting for a sign—amid all the clashing, the shouting, the spraying blood, the Skills flying, Laws blasting, the stifling mass of Core auras rolling over one another...

He stood there, watching as the sun came over the mountain-tops. Cresting the eastern horizon, lighting up the icy mountains, making them seem like great big icicles burning at the tips. Throwing the first warm rays of sunrise over the crimson battlefield.

"My lord?" said Ade.

“The sun,” said Eze softly. “It rises. In the east.”

He closed his eyes. He seemed to think this was enough of an answer.

A heartbeat. Two. Three…

And then—in at the very center of Base Camp—the teleporters, long-dormant, lit up.

A new aura roared into the world.

An aura so domineering it took the breath away—an eruption of raw power, so much it seemed to overflow the world itself, crashing over the rest of them like mighty ocean waves crashing over the sands. An aura built to shoulder the weight of the world.

It washed over those dozens of Core Monster Boss auras. And simply overpowered them. Dominated them. Suppressed them. Until it flared over them all, flared over the world. Supreme. Standing alone. Rising like a new sun against the brightening sky…

The fighting screeched to a halt.

And all those widening eyes looked toward the center.

The humans hearts soared, not daring to believe, not daring to hope. The Monsters were in an uncomprehending shock—then an uncomprehending fear—

"Surely—surely *not*—" gasped Ade.

A big man came through the portal. The moment he did that aura flared out in full.

The moment he did it was as though he took all that pressure—all that Monstrous aura—and destroyed it. As though he took all humanity's despair, all that crushing fear—took humanity itself and put it all on his broad back.

Hundreds of hopeless hearts lightened as one. Men sank to their knees in the bloody snow. Voices cried out in shock, in joy…

Emeka Eze gave a weary smile.

"Zane Walker has entered the battle."

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194. Monster Knight (I)

Every Faction there—from the Shaolin monks, to Vanessa's North Star, to Eze's Earth Mages—stood frozen.

Then, all at once, there was a great swelling of feeling.

Their moods had been nearing hopelessness after those long awful hours; now it was moving faster and faster, swinging toward a bursting, an almost hysterical joy.

Everyone knew exactly who Zane Walker was.

He was that man. It was a surreal scene—when all of humanity had failed, they looked to one man to carry the weight of them all. To be their strength when they had none left. The Monsters watching on did not understand how it could be.

This was just one man.

They felt Zane's power. It was a different kind than anything they knew. Not even Monster Knight felt like this—they stared and stared, and could not make sense of it.

The humans looked to him like he was hope itself.

A few started cheering outright. Especially behind the front lines—a certain Evan and Avery, who were very bedraggled and had been doing their best running around all night playing support, were the loudest, the most delighted. Most everyone else was still too stunned. But they knew exactly what was about to happen.

Zane stood there. Still for a moment, taking it all in. He was a big man—but in that moment he seemed bigger than even his stature. He seemed the biggest being there. It was his aura, the impression it gave off. It swallowed everything else… the moment he touched down in the midst of the battlefield, all gravitas went to him.

Behind him, Reina stepped through the portal—and she was looking at him with as much admiration as anyone. That was her man. She was bursting with pride as the portal closed up behind her.

Some of the other top World Rankers had felt his presence before. But now something had changed—it had to be his Core. There was no other explanation. But it was nothing like the Cores of those Monsters. It was like trying to compare fireflies to the sun; it was a joke.

That was no ordinary Core. The difference between Zane's Core and the Monster army ranged before him was greater than the difference between Core and Foundation.

And not a creature there knew how it was possible.

Just what had he managed to do?

The Monsters were more stunned than the humans, though. They could not make sense of him. The humans at least knew what kind of man he was. You were not meant to make sense of him.

Zane looked calmly around.

Emeka Eze knew Zane. He knew that despite how he appeared, most of the time he was not a fiery man. He bumbled about—he was rather calm. Reina liked to call him 'sweet.' Right now, though, he was exactly the cold-blooded destroyer everyone made him out to be. Right now his jaw was set. There was a bright intensity to his narrowed eyes.

He wanted one thing. And he would not be denied. Eze could guess what it was. Sitting just a few dozen miles away, atop Heaven's Peak.

He would carve his bloody way there if he had to. Eze pitied any Monster that dared get in his way.

Silence.

The Monsters looked to one another, uncertain. Then back to Zane.

And their natures, the Monstrous hatred burning at the centers of their souls, took hold again. They started to snort. Snarl. Slobber. One by one they snapped back to what they were.

These were Core Monsters. They would not be frightened off by an aura. An appearance. After the shock passed, a good chunk of the horde still did not believe.

One scary-feeling man was all that stood between them and total victory.

How hard could it be to slay him?

An Orc Chieftain gave a slobbering bellow. Another answered on the other side of the mound—then another, and another, until they were all roaring their battle-cries. The Blood-Imps began to shriek. The Dire Trolls slammed their six fists on the ground. And Tier 4 Laws began surging in force once more…

The Monster tide charged back up the hill.

Dozens of Core grade Monsters converging at once, on all sides, spewing their awful powers, merging to a rising wave of seething essence…

***

"Brace yourselves." That was the only warning Zane grunted.

He raised his hands. Clenched them to fists.

His massive chains dropped mid-air. Even bigger hammers hung on the ends—hammers lit with Stormfire.

A Stormfire powered by Zane's juggernaut Core.

The power that emerged did not belong in this world.

This realm did not know what to do with it. It was simply too much for it to handle.

All around those blazing hammers came a shattering, an enormous

tearing—seams ripped open in the very fabric of reality. Exposing gaping jagged pitch-black voids. Gale winds shrieked, sucked into the nothing.

And all around Zane—everywhere—Skills of all kinds grew unstable. Began to wobble in the face of it. An enormous weight had been dropped on the fabric of reality. And all those lesser things sitting atop it had no choice but to fall toward it, unstable…

Emeka Eze never swore. He considered it beneath him. And yet—staring at that eruption of sheer power—"Shit," he breathed.

Zane let out a deep roar—a primal sound, a sound that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. A Skill in and of itself. And somehow his hammers flared even brighter.

He stared down the hordes of rising Monsters. Smashed down.

And sent them all screaming back to hell.

***

No one saw it happen. It was too overwhelming for that. Their visions couldn't handle it. A few—the most powerful of the World Rankers—felt it in the astral plane. And even then they barely understood what they were feeling.

It was like standing in the presence of an atom bomb. The sound—the power—it was so blinding they couldn't even make it out. A few of them started to scream. They couldn't hear the sounds of their own voices.

An immense power swamped them in a fraction of a fraction of a second, and they thought that was it. There was no resisting this power. Like an act of some wrathful god.

Then they felt something in the way. Wrapping around them.

A soul. A shield spread in the Astral Plane cradling all the humans atop the hill. Protecting them.

It was Zane—flexing his own soul in a shield, gritting his teeth in tight concentration. Using some Skill. Shielding them from his own fire.

It made a forcefield. And the World Rankers stared about, mouths dry, eyes blinded. They felt it in the Astral Plane—a world of pure Stormfire. Flickering, raging, exploding, over and over, a hundred blasts going off all at once, rocking the world, leveling the world to ash, Monsters to ash, ash to ash, and again, and again—

They had only seen this kind of power in Law visions. Visions of higher powers. This was power beyond their comprehensions. Just the heat that managed to seep past Zane's soul control sent several of them stumbling to the ground. It felt painful just to be in the presence of it.

Zane let out another bellow. Exerted his will in an iron grip.

The Stormfire cut off. Vanished.

And in its wake there was a vast yawning void. Stretching all around them. A sea of midnight black cut out against the day, howling—but most of them were still too blinded to see it. By the time they regained their senses, the void had mostly closed up. Left the ruined world behind...

For a second most thought they'd been teleported. This was not the Himalayas.

This was a desert. A blackened desert with sands of ash, dunes of it piled all over. Even the atmosphere was wrong. It was humid, hot, a steaming place; geysers of lava spewed out of the ground here and there…

But no. Follow the ground, and you'd find a sea. A place miles wide where the extreme heat had reduced glaciers to steaming seas…

And miles later, you'd find Heaven's peak. Still standing. Though the ice at its base was now plain black rock. That ice had steamed to nothing.

Zane Walker had just unleashed such power he had changed the face of the Earth. He had broken the world itself.

For years, decades, ages, ice dared not intrude upon this place again. Long after they all left, this would be a desert of ash carved out against a snowy plateau.

***

But that was years later. This was now. And the other top World Rankers, the leaders of the Factions—the rulers of continents, the peak of humanity itself—were still taking it in.

Yuki. Eze. Cristina. Ming. On and on—they all acknowledged Zane Walker was the best. They did not like it, but they were forced to accept it.

But secretly, they all had a pride that burned within. Every one of them—to get where they were, the absolute peak—had a certain almost irrational self-belief. It was hard not to. Out of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions on their continents, they were the very best. Kings among kings, queens among queens.

Even after seeing Zane perform feat after feat they had convinced themselves they were, at least, in the same league as him. Their pride as the best in the world wouldn't allow them to think otherwise.

Right now they were still all in shock.

But hours later—reflecting on this moment—it was impossible to deny.

They would be embarrassed to call themselves top World Rankers anymore. There was a term—the T7—that had come to refer to the World Elite.

When an advisor brought up the term later to Yuki Urabe, the Sky Painter—already an elite at sixteen years old, who had believed he

was the most talented human in existence, who had perhaps, the biggest ego there—the teen got a queasy look on his face. He corrected them.

There was one top World Ranker. Zane Walker.

And then there was everyone else.

***

Zane looked across the devastation he had wrought, and found it good. He gave a pleased nod.

Then he turned his gaze to the highest peak. Still untouched.

Heaven's Peak. Where the First Gate of the Superdungeon lay.

"Is that the one?" he asked Eze.

Eze took a moment to respond—he was rather frozen. Then, eyes wide—he nodded slowly.

Zane grunted. Then he took Reina—easily scooped her up with one arm, molded her body to his. She held tight to him, eyes wide, rather breathless. He murmured a question to her—if she felt comfortable. She nodded.

He crouched. Stormfire erupted at his feet.

And he blasted off. Making a long arc for the mountain peak.

Time for retribution.

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195. Monster Knight (II)

Zane took a heavy breath.

Rivers of essence gushed into him. Core Monsters had so much to give. It all merged into an ocean with him at the center, soaking in the light….

Level up!
Essence Level 200 -> 201

A week ago he would've thought it a wealth of essence. But now he needed far more essence than before. He had to feed his Core. It felt like shoveling fuel into a high-powered furnace.

These Core Monsters felt suddenly weak, watered down to him. This was inferior essence, nothing like his own… it could not sate him. There had been maybe twenty or thirty of the Monsters—it wasn't enough.

He looked around, took in the damage he had wrought. He nodded, satisfied.

All the humans, he was pleased to see, had survived. They looked rather stunned by the whole thing.

Even Zane was a little surprised. He didn't think the world would rip that easily. He wasn't even sure how it happened.

This world seemed to have trouble holding him. Even when he stood nearly at rest—just keeping the engine of his core stoked and churning—the air gave little protests. Micro-tears rippled out around him.

He remembered this was an E-grade planet. He was pretty sure he had outgrown it. He was ready for the next grade up.

He was ready to graduate to the Superdungeon. Eager to in fact.

Everything here felt suddenly kind of breakable.

There was only one thing he wanted to break right now.

He frowned. His jaw clenched.

He turned and looked to a certain distant peak. To the clouds wreathing the tip of it…

"Is that the one?" he asked Eze.

Slowly, Eze nodded.

He grunted. Then—carefully—he scooped Reina up around the waist with one arm, held her tight to him, almost chest-to-chest. She made a little surprised noise before she settled into him and clung on. He always found her surprisingly easy to scoop. She had a small waist

but her body curved well to either side of it—she made for pretty secure holding.

He knew she wanted to help, and her healing powers could come in useful. Just in case.

He didn't feel he was going to need it though.

Right now he was still high off the thrill of the fight—off the feeling of untamed power coursing through his limbs, tingling at his fingers. His heart was still thumping strong in his chest. He looked to his hands. In that moment he felt like he could crush anything he put his heart to.

He asked Reina if she felt comfortable—she nodded quickly.

Then he kicked off. Launching for Heaven's Peak.

***

Again he underestimated his power. He meant to make it there in bounds—but one kick shot him up like a rocket. He blasted hundreds of feet in the air, winds shrieking—Reina pressed her face against his chest, closed her eyes, and clung on tight. Strands of her hair fluttered into his face as they flew.

He landed as gently as he could on an in-between mountain, took most of the shock in his legs. And launched off again.

This time he shot through the thick cloud layer. For a few seconds, all he saw was white. He was lost in the fog.

Then he broke through. Felt sunlight on the side of his face, the crisp coldness of the air, brushing down his arms…

And there was Heaven's Peak. Thrusting out of the clouds. It was as grand a mountain as Zane had ever seen, stacked high with dense slabs of snow, of ice, of granite. Proud, a beacon throwing back reams of rising sunlight, shining with a natural majesty—the sort of thing old-timey artists might devote their lifetimes trying to capture on canvas without ever managing it.

There was some mysterious quality to the place that couldn't be described, only felt. Something that trembled the heart, that struck you when you looked at it…

You have entered: Dungeon: Heaven's Peak (???)

He landed a few hundred feet beneath the peak. And let Reina down. It took her a moment to catch her breath. Her heart was going very fast. But when she took a deep breath and looked up again, she'd firmed up. She looked determined. Ready.

Together they marched for the peak.

You have entered:

Final Lair
First of Earth's Gates to the Graveyard of Lost Realms (???)
This Gate transports you to an unspecified floor of the

Graveyard of Lost Realms, the finishing dungeon for all integrated planets. Which floor you enter is determined by Fate. Which floor you exit likewise. Enter at your own peril.

This Gate admits one party only. Other parties must enter through other gates.

Zane paused. Was that the name of the Superdungeon—the Graveyard of Lost Realms? He wasn't sure what to make of the question-mark grading. Reina was frowning at it too. But she was not really in analyze mode. She was too focused on the fight ahead. She did think it didn't sound like a normal dungeon… it almost sounded like they would enter, and exit, through a small chunk of this 'Graveyard'. And the word 'transport' made it sound like a portal to somewhere else to her. The whole thing made it sound like somewhere other than Earth.

They decided to deal with it as it came.

The closer they got, the more destruction they saw. Scorch marks scattered on the mountainside. Ravines streaming down the mountain, going deep into the crust... It was evidence of Irina's last stand. The Minotaur had exerted such force against her it had not only overpowered her Godbeast Bloodline—with ease. It had shattered the mountain beneath too.

Reina tried not to look at it, though her anxiousness did jump. She tried to just focus on him. On his power, rather than its power. She felt more at ease.

They both shared the same belief. When Zane's power and this Minotaur's came together, it would be Zane coming out on top.

Soon they saw the capstone up ahead. Shattered. They saw reddish light streaming from beyond—the same light they'd seen in the vision, the light going out of the Gate…

They rounded a final bend, circled an outcropping of icy boulders. And stepped up onto the plateau of the peak.

And there. Sitting on the edge of those ancient runed stone stairs. Sharpening the edge of his axe with a stone—an edge blistering with black lightning...

Asterion (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 255

The Minotaur was even bigger in person. And the subtle aura it gave off... the fight hadn't even begun and Zane could tell this was no ordinary Monster.

Something about its aura felt very, very old to him. Like a creature out of an ancient myth.

What bothered Reina was that Irina Volkova had gotten so little out of the beast. It had killed her almost entirely with brute strength. They

hadn't seen what it was truly capable of—not even its Skills.

And it had to be capable of a lot more than just raw power. It barely looked like it broke a sweat when it killed the World #1…

Zane tried reading it with Sage Mind—getting a deep analysis. And was surprised to find he hit some kind of wall.

It was the first time this had happened.

He could still get a read on its feelings, though.

There was a brooding weight to its calmness, like the calmness of a boulder.

The Minotaur looked up.

It smiled hideously. Its teeth were like tombstones, its eyes dark empty voids.

I HAVE BEEN EXPECTING YOU. It rumbled. **EVEN AS WE FOUGHT. I KNEW. SHE WAS NOT THE ONE I WAS SENT TO EXECUTE.**

Zane stepped slowly closer. Narrowing his eyes at the creature. Feeling it out, getting a better read on it with Sage Mind. Its intents, its feelings…

Once he sank deeper into its aura he saw it was wider than his own, even—though it was much less deep.

Still. This thing's Core was not like those of the Monsters below. Everything about it that they could gather. Its Bloodline. Its Essence. Its Law. It was like a World Ranker compared to a mere mortal.

An Elite among Monsters.

It stood. Drew up to its full height. Ten-odd feet of rippling muscle.

And its Bloodline began to pump through its body. Awakening... its aura began to rise.

THAT EXPLOSION. IT WAS YOU. YOU DISPATCHED THE GRUNTS.

Zane stayed silent. Tensed. Ready.

It shrugged.

IF YOU HOPE I WILL FALL LIKE THEY DID. I MUST DISAPPOINT YOU.

It snorted. Plumes of smoke left its fat nostrils. **HAVE YOU COME TO FIGHT ME LITTLE ONE?**

Its eyes were set ablaze—and it let its aura out.

DO YOU TRULY BELIEVE… YOU CAN WIN?

It hit Zane like a hot summer wind. Buffeting him with a wide-ranging, fast-moving pressure on him, howling around him…

The Monster bellowed, a sound that trembled the grounds, sent

cracks shivering between Zane's feet.

And its aura skyrocketed.

It unleashed the full breadth of its powers for all to see. Towering to the high heavens... A miasma of darkness, of crackling lightning, tainted the air. Stifling. It was an unbridled strength. It was a certain overbearing pride. A primal Bloodlust, a bloodlust that a sea of corpses could never sate... That Core aura told you everything you needed to know about this creature. It laid its soul bare—proudly bare.

No wonder that World Ranker Team had paled. It was easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer force of its spirit.

But Zane Walker was not so easily moved.

His heart did not wither at the sight of it—it sped up, thumped harder. He grew more eager. His Core was like some great lion hearing a rival's roar—and yearning, seething, to respond with its own…

He unleashed his aura. Everything he was. His power. His soul. His will. It all poured out of him.

And it was a sight to behold.

And the two auras surged. Broke against each other, clashing feverishly—rising higher and higher, farther, blowing out against each other—two auras so strong the very fabric of reality struggled to hold them both—it was like seeing two great heavenly bodies side-by-side in the sky…

And then. Just like every other time Zane's aura had gone head-to-head with another—

Zane began to dominate.

It was an eclipse of body and soul. For though that Minotaur had a great deal of power in its aura—it couldn't hold. It lost ground. And soon it could no longer be denied. Its aura covered a great space. It might have shone farther... but in this first contact before the duel, Zane's power burned brighter.

The Minotaur just stared at him. Slobbering a little, choking a little. Its bull's mouth working, like it was chewing on a hard-to-swallow cud.

Then it began to laugh. A staccato grunting sound. It snorted.

SO THIS WAS NOT A WASTE OF MY TIME AFTER ALL. AT FIRST I BELIEVED IT WAS ABSURD TO SEND ME! EVEN FOR AN UR-PLANET… BUT YOU ARE NO ORDINARY NATIVE. WHAT GRADE OF CORE HAVE YOU ACHIEVED, YOUNG ONE? HIGH-PEAK?

Zane stayed silent.

REMARKABLE. NO BACKING. NO SECT. YET—YOU HAVE ACHIEVED A PEAK CORE WITH THE PIDDLING RAW MATERIALS

ON THIS BACKWATER PLANET…

It considered him more closely.

IF YOU HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO ROAM. BEEN PROPERLY NURTURED. YOU MIGHT HAVE ACHIEVED GREATNESS IN THIS UNIVERSE. A TRUE THREAT TO MONSTERKIND…

It gave a deep-throated sigh.

BUT YOU ARE FACING ME. I HAVE LOST COUNT HOW MANY WOULD-BE GREATS I HAVE CRUSHED BETWEEN MY FISTS… IN TRUTH. I ENJOY SLAYING THE GREAT ONES THE MOST.

It licked its lips. It was telling the truth. Zane could feel a new eagerness smoldering in that black heart. A hunger.

MY NAME IS ASTERION THE EXECUTIONER! It boomed. It thumped those two plates of muscle it called a chest. **GUARDIAN OF THE FINAL GATES! IT IS YOUR OWN GREAT MISFORTUNE TO FACE ME HERE. AT THE BEGINNING, RATHER THAN THE END…**

Its massive fists clenched tight. Its eyes shone blacker and blacker—**THAT LITTLE ICE-GIRL HAD THE HUBRIS TO FIGHT ME. YET SHE WAS NOT DESERVING OF MY TRUE POWER. FOR YOU…**

It stomped a foot. Snorted, like a bull about to charge—**I WILL GIVE EVERYTHING!**

Reams of black lightning surged down its body. Blasted through each of its muscles swelling them, pumping them full of essence—and the Monster began to inflate.

At the same time, it set its Bloodline on fire.

The first thing that became clear was just how potent a Bloodline it had. That Blood might be a lesser grade than Zane's—but the sheer quantity of it… it granted the Monster strange powers.

A ghostly image flickered over its head. A beastly avatar, like what Eze's Bloodline showed. But this one was far denser. Clearer, brighter, and it shone almost corporeal in the Astral Plane—a bigger, nastier version of this Minotaur, red-skinned, with horns sticking out of its mouth, jutting out of its head…

There was a resonance between its soul and Asterion's. An echo of very old souls. As though these were its ancestors, its heritage; it was somehow drawing power from the thousands of Minotaurs that came before it. Linked through history, through fate, by all that seething Blood..

It made the beast bulge even bigger. So big it was straining at the skin. Every last inch of it was packed full of raw, poorly restrained power—so much its body could hardly handle it. It was ready to explode.

It had made no empty boasts. This thing was not even close to being in the same league as those minions Zane had beaten. It could've crushed them all with one hand.

But Zane gave a grunt of his own. Stomped down. And his blood began burning too.

The might of the Titan Rhinoceros erupted through him. Bringing a ferocious power to his own muscles, making his aura explode, his body rage with his new Core essence. And his power towered to meet the Minotaur's once more—

GODBEAST BLOODLINE? The Monster Knight was stunned. Then it gave another bellow. A laugh shaking its whole body. **YOU GROW MORE INTRIGUING BY THE SECOND, LITTLE EARTHLING. BUT YOU ARE SIMPLY TOO LITTLE! THIS IS NOT EVEN ENOUGH BLOODLINE FOR TRUE MANIFESTATION!**

It crouched. All its muscles bunching, coiling, compressing… as though to charge.

YOU KNOW NOTHING OF THE SCOPE OF THIS UNIVERSE. THIS… IS WHAT TRUE POWER FEELS LIKE!

And it came at him like a freight train. Full speed. It kicked off so hard it was like hundreds of tons of dynamite going off at once, shattering the mountain peak, sending a good half of it avalanching down the other side—

Already it was upon him. Axe carving down chock-full of black lightning.

Zane let loose his Primal Roar. His body burned to the limits of its powers. And he threw up his Chain to greet it.

A Chain blazing with Stormfire. Powered by that unyielding, mighty essence at the Core of him.

An intense greed showed then in the Minotaur's eyes. A flaring bloodlust; its mouth curved into a wild ugly smile. It remembered how it had shattered Irina's Chains in one stroke. All it could think was how stupid this human was. It would take a sadistic glee in breaking Zane the exact. Same. Way.

Axe crashed over Chain.

The explosion rocked Heaven's Peak to its very heart. Tore gaping fissures deep into the skies. Dispersing the cloud layer, ripping scars into the Heavens themselves, tearing the waning stars from the sky...

The rush of raw power was like nothing Zane had ever felt—an overwhelming blast. Nothing could have prepared him for it. The amount of essence, Law, of sheer force that slammed into him, all at once—it felt like a mountain crumbling on top of him. It did not feel like the kind of power mortal flesh was meant to bear.

He gritted his teeth. Let out a grunt of pure effort—that grunt turned into a roar, louder and louder, as he struggled against what felt like a world of power. There was just one thought burning in his mind.

He refused to go down.

His Chains shuddered. A nearly unstoppable force bore down on them. On him.

But it found in Zane a totally immovable object.

All that power ran straight into him—that freight train crashing through him—and hit an absolute wall.

Zane's body took it all at once. Every muscle on his massive body straining to their maximum—and broke it where it stood.

It was as much a wall of will as a wall of body.

The trouble was it broke him too. And badly.

Pain erupted inside him. So much he didn't even know where to begin. So much of him shattered that instant.

His body was still pumping white-hot, his muscles still screaming with effort… and he'd felt a good chunk of them give out just then. Tear with the brute force of it. His whole mouth was full of hot blood. And so many bones were cracked—an arm, his legs, his ribs—he was surprised he was still upright.

Warning! Health under 75%

He didn't understand how it didn't go under 50%. It was damned close.

That power was no joke.

That 50-Level gap. That difference in Bloodline. At some point sheer quantity could still overwhelm quality. It nearly overwhelmed him. He was jumping a full half-grade in power, facing some Elite Monster.

Still Zane had believed that even against this beast, strength for strength, he could take it…

And he was proven right.

Only he paid for it with his body.

The Minotaur peered down at him—all its power run out of it in one big burst. Stopped utterly.

…EH?

It seemed shocked that he was still standing.

Still staring it down with the same fiery intensity.

Distantly he heard Reina cry out, saw a notification pop up—

You have been afflicted by: Buff: Evergrow
Regen +30%!
Duration: 1 minute

At the same time—

Skill Evolved!
Stormfire Renewal [Uncommon (E) -> Rare (E)]

And his body exploded. Over and over. In a Chain Combustion. At every broken chunk of him, Stormfire blew up. It exploded healing all over his body—blasting whole cracked bones, rebirthing torn muscle, healing at a shocking speed, twice, thrice, four times what it had been before—and Reina's powers only buffed him.

At the same time his muscles, powered by his Bloodline, his new Core, never stopped burning, building, straining, even within a shattered body—

And now as the Minotaur stood there. Still braced against him—Axe halted on Chain—heaving. Recharging after that mad rush…

This all took mere seconds. Not even enough time for the Minotaur to get over its shock. It was still staring wide-eyed at him like it was expecting him to fall apart at any moment.

No such luck.

He had just taken this beast's hardest, all-out blow.

My turn.

And his body began to surge…

Zane roared. Specks of blood splattered all over its horrified face.

He stomped. Hard. Shoved mightily, feeling every muscle in his body lighting up with a blinding power—

He forced the great beast back. Made that enormous Monster Knight stumble.

HOW ARE YOU STANDING?! choked Asterion. **YOU OUGHT TO BE BROKEN TEN TIMES OVER!**

It almost did break him. But it would never know that.

Zane's face had never changed. He showed no signs of weakness. That was just who he was. He barely winced, never cried out. If you broke his leg, he would keep running on it without complaint until the bone tore out of his body.

To this Minotaur, then, staring at Zane's stoic face—it seemed like it had barely wounded him.

And all of a sudden this ancient beast was shaken. Even as the momentum in Zane's muscles, building all this time, finally began to assert itself —

"*THIS*," Zane bellowed. "*IS WHAT TRUE POWER FEELS LIKE.*"

And he gave the beast everything.

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196. Monster Knight (III)

Zane ran Asterion straight over.

He started fast—and ramped even faster, like his body were a huge performance muscle car, shifting gear after gear—he slammed straight into it. And the Minotaur couldn't seem to make sense of its new reality. It stumbled back even as those dense slabs of bull-muscle bulged and groaned on its legs, veins and fibers stretched so tight they seemed ready to burst—

A legendary beast giving its max effort.

Zane let out another beastly roar. He shoved back even harder—and for a moment their muscles fought ferociously. Him shoving with Chain, the Minotaur shoving with Axe, hulking brutes going all-out side-by-side, burning so much power it warbled the air. Clouds of essence, of Bloodline, of Law hissed out of them as though leaking out of great steam engines.

Where their bodies met the world ripped wide open. You could see with your bare eyes, one force straining against the other—just by the scars it was leaving on reality…

And one side was clearly winning out.

One force just kept building.

Zane was running so hot now he was streaming essence all over. The air warbled around him, shrieking in protest—every heaving muscle was an engine burning enough essence to power a Safe Zone. His body, in that moment, could power a continent.

Only a God's body could handle that load—and even then Zane could not hold this long. He didn't need to. He unloaded every last shred of it, even as he felt his body ripping at the seams—

Asterion's eyes popped then. It gave a ragged gasp. This no longer felt like a fight. The Monster felt like some deer standing in the path of a freighter. As that power rose and rose, towering over it, it felt for the first time very, very small. Frail. It took everything just to stand its ground—only its disbelief, its utter inability to fathom just what in Heaven's name it was dealing with, locked it in place—

And soon even that was overcome.

Zane's raw brute force smashed everything.

Asterion's muscles burst like bloody balloons inside its enormous frame—it howled.

Asterion, with that Black Axe and all, must've weighed tons upon tons. Made cruise ships seem like feathers—and then it was flying,

sent hurdling through the air.

It crashed.

The crater smashed the mountain peak flat.

The Monster Knight was in tremendous pain—it was shattered all over. But still it tried to rise. It was in shock, almost in panic, but it still managed to get up to a knee, bleeding from bursts all over its vast musculature, heaving and choking.

It looked up.

Just in time to see what looked to be a meteor. The kind that drove extinctions. Crashing down to earth. Crashing right over it—blazing with so much Stormfire it was like staring into the center of the sun—

STORMFIRE SMASH!

Howling it threw up its Axe, pure reflex, something like a flinch. A shield of black lightning flared all over its surface.

That was the only thing that saved it.

Zane's hammer detonated all over it. And it brought with it the full brunt of his powers.

Asterion's Axe took the bulk of the force. And that age-old weapon, forged of some ultra-dark steel whose quality Zane couldn't even fathom, screeched as though in pain. And cracked down the middle—a jagged white line running tip-to-hilt.

Asterion cracked too. Bones shattering. Zane could hear it, feel its explosions of pain—but the beast itself was spared most of the force.

That wasn't even the worst part, though.

Stormfire exploded all over it.

That black lightning caught most of the first explosion. But that was only the beginning.

Chain Combustion did its nasty work.

One-two-three-four—a machine-gunning of ballistic blasts. Left-to-right—Stormfire erupted all over its face, its body, making a rainbow arc of destruction, leaving smoking, burning craters all over the Monster Knight's bulky body, like hundreds of meteors crash landing all over it—

Zane let out one last triumphant bellow.

And sagged. Almost falling to a knee. Sweating heavy, glistening with it. Breathing heavier. Locks of long dark hair were matted to his face.

He had dragged out nearly half the essence of his Core in that one huge sequence. And considering Zane—that meant a lot. His power only ramped, the expenditure growing exponentially. Another few seconds and he would've burnt out then and there. Even he had to take a breather. Recharge.

Still. It was enough.

It had to be the single greatest expression of power Earth had ever seen. By several orders of magnitude.

He looked over the smoking crater. So ruined with smoke he couldn't even make out its insides at first. But soon it started to clear.

The Minotaur had some impressive Passive Skills firming its body. Bloodline Stuff. Zane could feel it in that moment. It had tempered its body just like Zane had.

It was why its life force felt like a weak, wispy flicker. Instead of wiped flat. It let out a dragging cough, and cracked bloody tombstone teeth fountained out of its mouth. Its massive body had been smashed to half its width. A good chunk of its bones—a good chunk of its muscles—all shattered.

It was a broken animal. Its limbs dangled useless. Its jaw wrenched to one side of its face. One of its horns had been blasted fully off.

It let out a choking sob. It was whimpering even as it stood, shaking…

The pain it felt then was mind-shattering.

It was less broken than Zane had been. But then—it could not take pain like Zane could.

It took a certain force of will to be willing to stand on a broken leg, and feel it shattering beneath you, and still stand as though it were whole. And Zane knew not everyone could manage it. But you had to at least try, in Zane's opinion.

You couldn't let your enemy know you were shaken.

In this case it would not have mattered anyways, since Zane had Sage Mind. And his soul could simply read theirs. Especially if there was a difference in soul power—the wider the gulf, the easier they were to read. The Minotaur was not even bothering to hide or suppress its emotions.

Its entire mind was pretty much one emotion right now. Something like '*Holy Shit.*' But more intense. It was the kind of Holy Shit that made you doubt your very place in the world, that made it feel like everything you thought you knew was crumbling beneath you.

Now Zane was well over 75% too, thanks in part to his super-regeneration. And thanks in part to Reina's regen buff—it was percentage based. So it stacked nicely with his powers.

For the first time in that fight, it felt like he had the upper hand. It was hard to believe the Minotaur could come back from this. It felt ruined in mind, not only in body…

Then—to Zane's surprise—its demeanor started to change.

Even as its eyes leaked bloody tears it staggered up on its one whole leg.

And a new emotion sparked up inside it. Railing against the pain.

Sheer dumb rage.

It was made mad by the sheer force of its denial. It was furious that it had been shaken. Shaken by the likes of Zane.

NO. It snarled. **ENOUGH!**

And it roared. It sounded to Zane much more desperate than proud. **I AM ASTERION! EXECUTIONER AT THE GATES, BANE OF MURIM! IT WAS I WHO BROUGHT THE EMPIRE OF THE SUN TO ITS KNEES! I WHO SCALPED THE BLACKHEART SAGE—I WHO ANNIHILATED ENTIRE UR-PLANETS!**

There was something hysterical about the way it was roaring. Something strangled.

Then it raised its cracked Axe. And for the first time that fight—the dusky pearl at its end began to glow. The colors within started to swirl, like storms moving across the surface of a planet…

In Asterion's mind, it was about to go all-out. Now or never. It was bringing out the very last of its powers.

Zane was not sure what that pearl was.

He frowned, tried reading it. But he couldn't get an analysis. *Weird*. Only his higher tier Sage Mind powers were working. All he could feel was Asterion's mind, which was a little too garbled to understand much.

He could feel Asterion was going a little nuts. Ridiculously excited and desperate all at once.

Its soul weapon began to throw off a cold, pure-black light…

Zane frowned at it.

Suddenly… that thing almost felt like it had a soul. Not quite. But he felt impressions streaming out of it, fragments. So many exploding at him—mostly of fear and pain. Not from the Minotaur. They felt like from many, many, many different souls….

Kind of like he'd felt when the Minotaur had burned its Bloodline, and called upon the souls of its ancestors… those souls were lending that weapon a strength it could never have on its own.

And there were a lot of souls in there. Some a lot more strong than others—especially the bigger fragments. Not all human. Dragon? Elf? Phoenix? Some even felt like Godbeasts, once…

The weight of history lay in that weapon.

YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN THIS, HAVE YOU?! The beast was still roaring, spluttering, spitting big gobs of saliva. Delirious. **THIS IS THE POWER OF THE FOURTH CLASS EVOLUTION! THE WEAPON SOUL—POWERED BY ALL THOSE IT HAS CLAIMED! ARISE, BONECLEAVER… AND REAP YOUR LATEST VICTIM!**

The Axe's aura flared. And suddenly it had a new dangerous edge. Its power just jumped drastically, Zane felt—it grew blinding in the

astral plane. It had already been super heavy. But now it started sinking through stone as though it were water.

Just how heavy had it gotten…? And that extra weight, that new ability, was powered by those souls it had slaughtered—just how many souls were in there…? Thousands? Millions?

He frowned. He felt a new sense of danger coming from that thing. It had jumped to a whole different stratosphere of power. Even if he blocked or countered, it could still badly hurt him—that he was certain of.

It was time for him to go all-out too. This was for everything.

Zane was struck by a sudden idea.

He knew just what power to use. Now was the perfect chance. It took a while to charge, so he hadn't been able to set it up for a while. But now…

It was time to pull out his ultimate killer weapon. Something that had not seen even Plasma, much less Chain Combustion.

All the damage his body had suffered until now—and all his new Core Powers—began smashing together in an instant. Thickening, burgeoning fast, condensing so fast it seemed like a rising explosion—

FOOL! Cackled Asterion. **YOU WOULD STAND THERE, AND LET ME CHARGE MY CLEAVE? IT IS TOO LATE NOW! BEHOLD!**

It raised its axe. It took a full-body effort, and it almost failed in its try. But it managed it.

That great Axe hung proud overhead.

The power coming off that edge… just casually swiping it about tore gaping holes in reality.

I HOLD IN MY HAND THE POWERS OF THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEAS!

Zane did feel an immense weight coming off it now. So much that gravity warped toward it and stones all around it began to float. Like it was wrestling them away from Earth's own gravity.

But Zane stayed the way he always was in fights. At once calm in his mind. And fiery in his heart.

He felt he knew something stronger than the mountains and the seas.

He raised his Axes to the high Heavens. And called every last drop of his power.

His Core spun to its maximum—shedding all its essence at once. Throwing it out into one specific Skill. It took his whole body straining with all it had just to keep this thing upright—and he had to hold it tight. If he didn't, he knew it could rip him clean in two—

A primal sound tore out of his throat then. Pure, all-out effort.

And he unleashed a new power into the world…

Skill Evolved!
Wish Upon a Star [Common (E) -> Rare (E)]

It felt like he'd spawned a new sun. A sun so bright it eclipsed the one in the sky. It felt like he'd thrust out the might of his entire Core.

And the moment it appeared it broke everything.

A blank void stretched across the whole sky. Like it was made of brittle paper and he'd just punched a gaping hole through it. Carved out a new night sky in the middle of the day. A night sky with no stars. A night sky with just one horrible, beautiful, shining sun…

The moment it appeared, the Legendary Monster's final, desperate move just seemed irrelevant.

The whole world seemed irrelevant.

The moment Zane's star appeared, it broke minds. Even as it broke the world. It was like a mortal staring at the true face of god. Some things were not meant to be seen. Were too much to understand. It was just too much.

Asterion looked up at it. Stared at it. For a moment, it stayed silent. Shaking.

Then this beast of legend—a beast that had seen the eons come and go, that had wiped kingdoms from the face of the world, that had cleaved open moons with a stroke—

Collapsed trembling to its knees.

Its Axe just slipped from its sagging fingers. Useless.

It let out a single whimper.

And Zane dropped the hammer.

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197. Monster Knight (IV)

It was a lucky thing that they'd evacuated so thoroughly. Hundreds of miles. One target.

You could see the eruption from space. It looked like a flower blooming stark blue-white. Colors you'd only see in the fiercest, most violent of thunderstorms. Spreading slowly over the face of the Earth.

Only half a flower. Blooming in a crescent. The other end hit a hard wall. Some tremendous soul was guiding its path, curving it away—shielding everyone on the other side...

If Zane was honest, he did not have much left in him at that moment.

But Reina was right behind him. So he found it within him. And that power kept blooming, to a kind of power that would reduce cities to fine-grained dust, then countries—he roared straining. Giving of himself. And restraining himself.

He just kept finding the will to do it. He was stubborn like that.

Where the explosion was allowed to flow free, it flowed unchecked. Exploding in a vast chain, over and over, shining lines scarring the face of the planet. With such force it flattened mountain ranges, caved in entire plateaus.

Thousands of years on when villages would make their lives here on their lakeside stilt-houses, fishing in these vast blue expanses they called the Heavenly Lakes—once, to another, lost civilization, the Himalayas—they would never know those vast reservoirs were craters.

And those craters were the work of one man.

When it was all done, when it all settled—when the vast gaping gulfs in the world closed up, those trenches in reality sewing together—there was a silence.

The silence of absolute nothing. Not even drifting smoke.

Everything that moved was ash. Even the wind had been charred out of existence. No clouds dared show their faces. Blue sky. Black Earth. On and on and on...

It looked like something out of a surrealist painting. Nothing that ought to exist in real life.

It was peaceful—the peacefulness of the aftermath, of destruction, of death in its purest form.

Zane frowned.

Warning!

You have done considerable damage to E-Grade Planet: Earth. Planetary destruction is strictly against universal code.

Zane blinked. *Hmm*.

He was trying hard not to black out again. But it was the one battle he was okay with losing. Partly because he wasn't sure he could do anything about it.

He was just about to face-plant—halfway through dropping—when Reina caught him, hugging him, pulling him up, pouring in her healing, and instantly a warm light wave flowed over him. Soaked through him, like her soul had caught his too, and was helping bear his up. And he stayed there, upright, if swaying.

"Zane," she gasped. "That was incredible!"

Zane grunted. He was having trouble forming a complete thought right now. He wobbled. It felt like his head was stuffed with wet cotton balls.

The fight was over. That much was quite clear. He blinked at her flushed face. He couldn't focus on anything except what was in front of him, which was Reina's face right now. He was about to tell her he thought she had a very good face when she started talking again.

"Do you realize what you've done?"

He blinked at her. "You just saved mankind—you ended its greatest threat!"

Right—the fight.

Zane was happy with how it all turned out.

It was a good fight.

Just then—

Level up!
Essence Level 201 -> 202
Level up!
Essence Level 202 -> 203
Level up!
Essence Level 203 -> 204
Level up!
Essence Level 204 -> 205

Huh.

…That Minotaur did have a lot of essence. So it made sense. He couldn't remember the last time he got four Levels in a row.

He could stay upright a whole lot better now. His body was totally rejuvenated. It was his soul that was the problem.

It took a little before he regained his senses.

***

"He did it," whispered Cristina Dos Santos.

“Woah…” gasped the Sky Painter.

“Mad bastard,” said the Spitfire Monk. He shook his head in disbelief and took a swig of wine. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Eze was silent. Just staring at the distant flower. He nodded. Closed his eyes, deep in thought. “What power,” he said softly. That was all.

Vanessa Volkova had woken up too. The moment she did, she’d tried to fight—anyone and everyone, including her own soldiers—until she realized the fight had left her behind. Zane was finishing it up on the far plains. The whole time she’d watched the projection, her face a cold blank mask, as Zane went to war.

She started cracking a little as Zane showed more and more of his power—as he started crushing that awful Monster Knight. Her face started flickering with a kind of joy, then hate, all at once. A tension went out of her—she almost cried.

Once the dust settled, though, she sat there silent. Watching the projection. Thinking. She was still staring long after Zane left.

There was a hint of yearning in her eyes. It wasn’t a silly crush, the way she’d once looked at him. It was something different.

She wasn’t thinking of him anymore as the handsome stranger she’d met all those months ago in the Abyssal Crater dungeon. She wasn’t that girl anymore either. That all felt like a lifetime ago to her.

She saw what had happened to her mother. She saw what Zane had shown her…

“Miss Volkova?” asked Alexey. The Deputy Faction Head.

She stood. “Take me back to Headquarters,” she commanded crisply. Her eyes flashed with a cold bright determination. “I’ve got training to do.”

***

Every one of those top World Rankers looked at first in awe. And then—slowly—their feelings began to change.

Some took a little longer. It happened after they returned home. But they all came to the same emotion.

A sense of inspiration.

Zane had just shown just what mankind could accomplish.

These men and women were the peaks of human talent. The uncommon among the uncommon. They all had an ironclad determination. An incredible ambition. Each and every one. If they saw a bar raised, they would try to clear it as best as they possibly could. It was simply in their nature. That was what set the great ones apart.

In this way, all of humanity was pulled forward. Zane hadn’t even meant to do it.

Later, when historians tried to make sense of what made this wave

of humanity so special—what made them the cream of the crop even among Ur-Planets—they would cite Zane Walker. He was the star that lit the way. The one man the best of humanity looked up to—and chased.

And as these folk went back to their continents, burning with new drive, that drive would spread to those under them too… and new training systems, ideas, standards would bloom from there—it was that ripple effect that made Earth special.

It all started from the top.

***

Zane's fight with Asterion broke records all across the globe. It was the most viewed event of all time. Billions gathered, watching breathless, listening from hundreds of records across dozens of different languages, all covering the same single event. The fate of humanity itself was on the line. There were multiple reporter teams covering it just in America—though the most-watched tv show personalities had been with Zane since the beginning, the duo of the enthusiastic showman Tyler Saunders and the analytical if excitable color commentator Becca Dwyer. They were unusually tense in their coverage. They were both pulling for their guy. In that fight, everyone was rooting for him.

As a consequence, Zane's Last Wish was burned into the minds of everyone watching. Where it would last the rest of their lives. You could almost hear the relief washing over the world. The cheers, the cries. For some, they burst out in tears. Rippling across the Americas, Europe, Africa, all of Asia, Oceania, and the Pacific Islands. Even those in little colonies on the poles, warming themselves in their sealskin cloaks, chewing on Spirit Salmon flesh, watching by the light of campfires jumped up and hugged each other.

It was a time for celebration. A shared feeling spread across all mankind…

***

Zane was oblivious to all of this of course. After he got out of his slobbering woozy state—during which he asked Reina multiple times if she knew she was really very pretty, which was, to be fair, his true feeling on the matter—his attention turned to the things the Minotaur had dropped.

Soul Weapon Core [Uncommon (E)]
The Soul Weapon Core of the Dread Executioner Axe.
Age: 12 millennia
Souls claimed: 739,441

He took hold of it. Weighed it in his hands. It occurred to him this core had been around reaping souls since before the recorded

invention of agriculture. Which was kind of strange to think about. He felt within it the residue of countless souls. Humans. Drakes. Goblins, catkin, alligator-men, birds of prey…

He pocketed it. He would figure out what to do with it later.

The most important thing by far was the system notification that came with his victory.

Monster Knight slain! Final Gate Boss Slain!

This Final Gate Boss was slain prior to entering the Superdungeon.

Challenge Difficulty: Hell

Calibrating compensation…

Huh.

Rewards:

3 Drops of Titan Rhino Bloodline [Rare (E)]

3 Drops of Nymph of the World Tree Bloodline + Grand Tome of the Nymph of the World Tree [Rare (E)]

3 Drops of Raijuu Bloodline + Grand Tome of the Raijuu [Rare (E)]

3 Drops of White Fox Bloodline + Grand Tome of the White Fox [Rare (E)]

This was quite something. A few vials hovered before him, all glowing with their own auras—the Titan Rhino's Bloodline thick and turgid; the nymph's cool and light; the Raijuu's crackling, pinging off the walls of the vial, and the White Fox's so wispy it appeared as a light mist.

All of them were Godbeast Bloodlines, by the aura they gave off.

This seemed tailored and targeted. Obviously there was the Titan Rhino. But once he looked at the individual vials he saw they were meant for his closest friends.

The Nymph of the World Tree, for instance, was a Wood-Essence Godbeast that greatly boosted Wood Law powers. Greenery bloomed at its feet with every step. It was the caretaker beast of the World Tree—the very same one Reina's Bloodline came from.

The Raijuu seemed to be meant for Evan, and the White Fox for Avery. The System was being unusually considerate. Then again—it seemed appropriate given what it just threw at him.

After he finished gathering his loot, another box popped up. Reina got it too.

***

Attention Earthlings

The First Gate has been opened. A party must enter within 60 days.

Shortly thereafter, eight other Gates will open across the continents of Earth, making nine Gates in total. Each Gate will admit one party into the Superdungeon. Send your best to represent you. The fate of your world is at stake.

The official name of the Superdungeon is 'The Graveyard of Lost Realms:' A prison of the Universe designed to hold those realms lost to Monster hordes.

These realms are myriad, making up thousands of floors in total. They have accumulated since the dawn of the System. This is the first prison of the Universe. And its greatest.

At the shallowest floors they include locations such as the Nightmare Realm or the Mirage Kingdom. Deeper in, realms are dominated by the lairs of Ranked Monsters such as the Shattered Skyrealms or the Dragonlands. Some of the deepest floors are occupied solely by the corpses of Monster Gods.

You need not worry about the deeper floors. The challenge has been set so that you will not come close to encountering them. Even Galactic powerhouses would struggle to survive in the very deepest floors.

Each floor is rife with dangers. The deeper the floor, the more dangerous they become. Yet with great risks come great opportunities. Superdungeon tests have been where the truly talented make their names. They are not only rife with lost treasure—they are also closely watched by local galactic Factions, to judge the worthiness of potential recruits.

To prove your planet's worth you must enter through your world's Gate and exit through a Final Gate three floors lower. You will be dropped at a floor befitting your party.

May Fate favor you.

Aiwë Creator of the System

***

Zane blinked at it.

He didn't know what to make of all of it so he looked at Reina, who was already chewing on it. He was sure she'd figure something out. A lot of it was already what she suspected anyway.

What troubled her most, though—

"That Minotaur said it'd been sent to execute you," she murmured, brow creased. "It seems like the Monsters have some kind of influence over their own prison? When you go through that Gate what'll be waiting for you on the other side?"

She shook her head. "Zane… I have a feeling they won't just drop us on any floor. They'll throw everything they can at you."

Zane was silent for a moment.

Then he shrugged.

“Let them come,” he said simply. “I will be ready.”

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198. World Building (I)

60 days.

That was how much time everyone on Earth, including Zane, had to get ready for the biggest threat their world had ever known.

There was a log jam in the World Rankings. Zane wasn't the most talented Leveler. He got there by brute force. Tons of folk were in the Level 190s, itching to break through.

Soon, Zane expected, he would be joined. By other top World Rankers, and also his friends.

They would need to make the most of it.

He and Reina had talked it over these past few days. She was worried about their world. She wondered if there was a way he could help out—and Zane agreed. In the background she started putting something together.

***

But first he went home. It had been a long day.

He was greeted with a celebration on the quaint cobble streets of the Luminous Faction. Reina did her best to keep the small-town medieval look going even as Headquarters ballooned out into a full-fledged magic megacity. And she mostly succeeded except for times like now. It seemed like folk had portaled in from all over the globe. Just to welcome him home. The streets were overflowing.

They were waiting to cheer him on at the portal. Again, Reina's security did its work—a bunch of Warriors blocking off the routes, Mages with soft shields clearing a path. Very efficient and professional.

At the very end, though, one of the team timidly came up to him —"Sir!"

It was a redheaded girl. The System identified her as 'Maddie.' There was a blonde girl at her side.

"Sir, do you remember me?" said the girl, blinking up at him. She seemed a bit starstruck.

Zane blinked at her. He did not in fact remember her, though he was trying.

A guy with a buzz cut came up too. 'Jake.' And another burly warrior. 'Arjun.' They seemed to be some kind of team. Their cloaks ran the Luminous Faction colors—white, purple, with a splash of dark-green.

"Sir—we met in San Diego!" said Jake, all bright-eyed.

It took Zane a second. "…Oh. Right."

Reina, on his arm, leaned over. "This is Elite Team 3," She whispered. "The Starlit Defenders."

"It was an unforgettable day," rumbled Arjun. "We learned more watching you than we had in months of fighting, sir."

"You did?"

"It was your mindset, sir! The way you thought about fights, how you kept your cool, your focus… it was something else," gushed Jake. "When we tried keeping our cool, and just focusing, we worked so much better… we learned that from you!"

They all nodded.

Zane had a bit of face amnesia sometimes. He saw lots of new faces all the time these days. He did remember these guys now that he thought about it.

They came to congratulate him in person on his victory. Also they wanted him to sign their cloaks, which he did. And they wondered if he had some fighting tips too, maybe, while they had him. Maybe some tips on breakthroughs or Laws? A few of the other security folk had peeled off to join them—a little crowd was forming. Zane saw they were other Luminous Faction Elite Team members too. He recognized a few. Fluffy-haired Rogue boy, mousy Priest girl with glasses. Mostly they were quite young, high school-aged or college. Eyes shining, flushing as they came up. They all wanted to know everything about him. Even stuff he thought rather boring.

Now that Zane thought about it he had been running pretty hard this whole time. He was thinking through his next few weeks as he spoke.

There was a two-month window where he was kind of bottlenecked on what he could do. He would check out that Red Moon Pagoda, brush up on his Soul Skills, maybe see about learning another Concept —once his fatigue had worn off.

But for the next few weeks, his soul would be too exhausted to do much. He'd spend most of his time Leveling, and buffing his body, and taking in his Bloodline... those extra three drops should get him pretty far. Enough to hit that 'Manifestation' stage where he could summon that phantom of the Godbeast. He could push the Blood deeper too, into his bones and organs, making all of him as tough as he could—his body cracked far too much for his liking as it was...

Anyway. It wasn't that intensive now that he thought about it. He supposed he could spare some time. Take a breather. Maybe help teach some folk in his own Faction. He liked the idea of it.

As he looked around at all of them—at this Faction which had sprouted from the very first dungeon he'd cleared, which he'd spent so long building. Everything had grown up around him with Reina's

help, which he'd just defended... he felt a strange burst of pride.

It was a feeling that had been coming and going these last few months. Last few weeks especially. He wasn't used to it—it surprised him. He usually only felt these things about Reina and Avery and Evan.

Maybe it would be good to help out a bit.

He nodded.

These young ones had chosen to follow him. He could teach them what it meant to be strong.

Before he left, he told them so—he'd take some time out a few mornings a week to answer questions. Help instruct them.

They were delighted.

**

Avery and Evan popped back up soon after and tackled Zane in big hugs. There were lots of hugs to go around today.

"Once we were all surrounded some of those old fogeys started getting mopey," Avery told him. She gave him a pat on the back. "They said it was all over! But I kept telling them—You just wait, Zane's coming! He's like one of those old chunky Nokia phones. Is he a bit slow? Probably. And is he the prettiest thing to look at? Nope! But when you need something reliable and impossible to break, something that'll get the job done, he's your guy!"

She grinned up at him. Evan nodded.

"…Thanks?" said Zane.

Zane was a little too tired to do much after that. He and Reina just plopped down and slept straight-up, which was fairly unusual for them. She still sprawled over him and used him as a pillow though. He wrapped an arm around her and dozed off. At this point it would feel weird to sleep without holding her.

The next day Reina, Evan and Avery went off to absorb their new Bloodlines, each with their new fancy Tomes.

He told them not to breakthrough to Core yet though. He would have some things to share when the time came.

***

Zane spent a little time on his new fledgling coaching thing. Around mid-day in one of the exclusive upper-floor training fields of his dojo, he met up with a crew of a dozen or so of the Factions finest young talents, hand-picked by Reina.

It turned out he was mostly not good at actually coaching Skills. He didn't know their Mage Skills or Rogue Skills or Archer Skills. And they didn't want that from him anyway. They peppered him with questions—mostly about his mindset when fighting, and his experiences fighting. It was almost like a Q&A session with a bunch of fans. He wasn't sure what they got out of it but they all seemed to

think they learned a lot.

Reina assured him they did. They might be young but they were World Rankers too, she reminded him. They knew how to train already; they were all world-class experts in their own rights. What they could learn from him had to do with the psychology of elite fighters—something that'd boost them to that next level, or something. He wasn't sure.

Most of the next two weeks or so he worked on himself. First, he absorbed Asterion's Soul Weapon Pearl. There were probably some other uses for it, but Zane couldn't figure them out. And right now he wanted to get as strong as possible. So he just absorbed the insides for essence. They were quite rich as well—

Level up!
Essence Level 205 -> 206
Level up!
Essence Level 206 -> 207

Then came the Bloodline. Three drops of nice thick liquid floating in a clear glass vial. Just the heaviness of it, the feel of the glass in his hand, gave him pleasure. It was a well-made glass, charmed to contain a very powerful substance.

He uncorked it—put it to his lips. And drank.

One drop settled into his mouth. It was a lot easier to control now with Emperor's Soul. It felt like a scalding hot bead going down his throat; he could track its progress just by how it burned going down, the scalding tingling trail it left from his tongue, arcing deeper…

He guided it carefully down his throat, into his body. And with his new Core, taking in the essence was easy.

He did it again. And again—

Level up!
Essence Level 207 -> 208
Level up!
Essence Level 208 -> 209

But the levels weren't the valuable part.

Bloodline Increased!
Titansteel Rhino Bloodline (Godbeast): 2 drops -> 3
Bloodline Increased!
Titansteel Rhino Bloodline (Godbeast): 3 drops -> 4
Bloodline Increased!
Titansteel Rhino Bloodline (Godbeast): 4 drops -> 5

And with that new blood, those strong Bloodline passive skills of his got new boosts too.

Skill evolution requirements met!
Skill evolved!
Indomitable Hide [Uncommon (E) VII -> Rare (E) III]
Skill evolved!
Behemoth Muscles [Rare (E) III -> Epic (E) I]

He swallowed all of that over the course of two days. It would be the bulk of his Leveling during this break, probably. Each of those was a heavy-duty treasure—chock-full of essence. They would've shot him up maybe fifteen Levels before Core. But that was the cost of his new essence. It super-powered his Skills—but getting more felt almost absurdly hard. At least with what he had now.

He would need to wait for the Superdungeon, he supposed, before he had a chance. The S-rank Vials of Essence he had just weren't doing it for him anymore.

In the meantime, Reina had gathered a huge stack of metals for him. Trading in big chunks of their coffers. But by then, news had got out that Zane Walker wanted high-grade steel treasures. And all of a sudden gifts started pouring in. The Cherry Blossom Order, whose Patriarch was Kazu Urabe, the Sky Painter's grandfather, gifted him the S-grade helm 'Skull of Lazarus'—a smoky shadowy gorgeous thing made of some special blackish-grayish alien metal. It came with a fancy-looking note on nice-smelling paper.

The big Brazilian Faction, Forte Uniao, gave him a pure-gold chestplate, also S-grade. The surprising one came from The Empire Faction—D'Angelo's and Jason's Faction. Twenty ingots of S-grade Mithril. It came with a polite note from D'Angelo. Zane wasn't sure what that was all about, but he ate it anyway.

All in all he got a dozen new S-rank treasures this way. As gifts.

Like with his essence, it took a lot of great treasures to bump him up a little. But a lot of great treasures was exactly what he got.

Skill up!
Indomitable Hide III -> IV

After all those big upgrades to Indomitable Hide—first the Bloodline, then pouring in all that new metal—he could feel a new tightness, a new density, to his skin. It was starting to change in its very structure. It felt like they held together much better at the smallest of levels, with his Bloodline acting as a kind of glue, almost. And it'd only get harder when he burned it.

Which all meant he suspected even Asterion would've had trouble cutting past his skin.

The most valuable, though, came from Eze. An S+-ranked shield of elven make, with glowing script all along the edges, immensely dense. It came with a thoughtful, if short, note. It expressed thanks,

admiration, and a continued hope for friendship. It used exactly as many words as it needed to get the point across.

Zane chomped it down gratefully.

Skill up! Behemoth Muscles II -> III

His muscles were already overkill. But he just kept making himself more and more powerful. You could never be powerful enough. It might as well have been Zane's life philosophy.

He could sense other avenues of power opening up to him now that he had those new drops. But he would need to comprehend more of his Bloodline Tome for that. And his soul wasn't quite there—give it a few weeks. Then he could temper his insides. See how strong his body would be after remaking his tendons, and his vital organs, and his bones with a Godbeast's power.

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199. Core Summit (I)

In the meantime… the only thing to do now, besides eating whatever steel he could find, was to do the last real effective way of Leveling. Which was Reina.

Level up!
Essence Level 209 -> 210
Skill up!
Mephisto's Pleasure Sutra VI -> VII

It wouldn't be so bad if she didn't have to get up to do her very important job the next day. But with what he put her through some days, she'd be wiped out until early afternoon.

Like today. He woke feeling pretty good. Refreshed. As usual he found himself clutching something soft, molded well to his body. He yawned, sat up—she slid off him limp.

"…Reina?" he said, blinking.

She let out a soft whimper, still splayed out.

He felt kind of bad. He had the thought that he'd bring her lunch in bed. It would be a neat surprise. He went down to their kitchens and tried making her lunch—it had been a while though since he'd done so with his new body. Everything felt so flimsy to him. He broke knives. Then plates. Then the oven. His hands always felt too big and too clumsy for kitchen utensils. It was irksome.

About thirty minutes in, he had a stray thought.

Maybe he should give it up. Maybe he was only good for breaking things.

Reina was always the one who made things out of the two of them.

He was just about to give it up. Then a thought flashed through his mind. He frowned down at the blackened plate.

No. This egg will not defeat me.

***

The egg did not share his opinion on the matter. It proceeded to thrash him—with contemptuous ease—for the next 2.5 hours.

But after that, he finally made a breakthrough. It was an effort of sheer will. After over a hundred frustrating minutes, and thousands upon thousands of defeats, most would have quit. But not Zane.

He *would* make an omelet.

Three hours later he completed it.

It was an incredible feeling. Even if he did not get a Skill level from

it, he felt that he deserved a Level up. It had been harder to learn than most other smashing Skills in his experience.

It was a pretty bad omelet. But he finally had the mental upper hand, and it spurred him on. By then he had run through a few cartons of eggs. Also a few dozen pans. But he kept going.

Finally—after another hour or so of maximum effort—he ended up with a non-burnt thing that looked mostly decent. He could only hope it tasted as not-bad as it looked.

He started making the next part of the meal set. He was quickly gaining confidence. The fruit basket was Reina's favorite, and he knew just what kind of strawberries to get—a specific kind she liked, grown in one of Nova Roma's vineyards. He fetched them from a Bag of Holding.

These at least were easy. Or maybe he just felt it was easy because his kitchen skills were Leveling up so fast. The trick was to hold the strawberries very gently, so that they did not explode when you picked them up. And then put them on the plate. It only took him two tries.

At last, he put the two items together. Strawberry and omelet. The meal was complete.

He was quite excited. And proud if he was honest—that was hard. He put it all on a plate, and turned, and found Reina standing there yawning, rubbing her eyes, nightgown hanging loosely off her.

"I heard an explosion," she mumbled. She looked around at the mostly-blackened kitchen. "…What happened?"

She thought they had come under a ballistic missile attack that Zane had repelled or something.

He blinked. "Uh."

He explained what was going on. What he had been trying to do. She was trying very hard not to laugh—keeping a straight face, nodding—but he could feel her amusement growing by the word. Soon she had to put a hand over her mouth to keep it together. "Oh," she said at last.

He felt kind of dumb. He blinked down at his blackened hands. He probably should have just run down to the chef's quarters.

But once she got over her amusement she was quite pleased. She gave him a smile like the morning sun coming out. It was hard for him to imagine why she appreciated his effort but she did. She savored his burnt egg like it did not taste like burnt egg and said she loved it and gave him a kiss. Zane decided she was probably a saint.

***

The next few days, they Leveled Mephisto's Pleasure Sutra 3 times more.

Another thing—after taking her Bloodline, Reina's body had

improved a lot too. Her body had gained the qualities of the Godbeast nature spirits. Her regeneration improved a lot, but her flexibility and pliability particularly more. It meant they could push harder, Level faster—by the end of it she was on the brink of Level 200.

Meanwhile—in their other time—Reina also spent a good deal of time trying to figure out the Superdungeon. She gathered as many resources as she could; notebook relics, memory recordings, that kind of thing. She also simply used her own photographic memory, trawling through every notification that had popped up for clues. She had an incredible ability to sort it all out in her head, make connections out of it all. She started piecing together clues, making theories.

Usually, she spent a few hours in the evenings talking it through with Zane as they cuddled. Zane mostly lay there and listened as carefully as he could and nodded. She said it was very useful for her even though he didn't do anything. She liked bouncing things off of him.

So far what they knew was this. The challenge was a route. It would pass through 4 floors, each one deeper into the Superdungeon, each of increasing difficulty.

The tricky part was—they weren't always one floor deeper than the other. Some gates tunneled to weird places. Some were like chutes, dropping deep down—and they seemed to shift too, like the dungeon had a mind of its own.

It wasn't a pure prison, Reina surmised. The Monsters seemed to have some kind of power over it. They could influence it subtly. The Minotaur was not supposed to come out of that Gate. That flickering of the wards, the way those notifications spazzed—it was consistent with reports of what happened when the System was being tampered with.

Her big worry was that these Monsters would use their influence to try to kill him. They seemed afraid of him—or rather what he could become, she said. And she felt proud and scared at once.

She was certain they couldn't just portal him down to the very bottom, where those old gods lay. Or spring any other kind of instant-kill trap on him. They didn't have that level of influence. Based on her study of other Ur-Planets' diaries, it was more of a bending of the rules to make things harder than they needed to be.

"They can't make things absurdly unfair," he said, trying to put everything she was saying together. "There's… some kind of… soft cap. For each floor."

"That's right," said Reina.

Her head lay on his chest—she looked up to catch his eyes, blew a lock of stray chestnut hair out of her face. They looked at each other—

him right-side-up, her upside-down.

"There's still some rules they have to follow—or at least, work around," she told him. "For instance, there's Kobold Prince Graxes' run. He was dropped on Floor 47, which is a full five floors deeper than what Ur-Planets normally get. The Monsters wanted them dead—badly."

She shook her head, frowning. Her eyes got this faraway look. She was going into professor mode.

"They stocked the floors of his run with the worst Monsters they could get away with. But it ended up backfiring since the deeper floors have better treasures—and stronger Bosses would drop far greater rewards."

"It's a bigger challenge," said Zane. "But if he rose to it. He would reap far greater rewards."

"That's exactly what happened," said Reina, nodding. "He went through that trial by fire and in the end—through skill and a good deal of luck—he ended up making it through the Final Gate and saving his planet. He went on to join the Azure Flame Faction. He'd eventually join the Inner Faction, earn an Elder position, and become the 'Sage of the Iron Flame'… but that's for another time."

"Huh," said Zane. He paused. His eyes narrowed.

"If they want to throw Monsters at me. But killing them would make me stronger… they would be foolish to try this. Not against me."

That he was confident on.

"They will," said Reina. "It's worked for pretty much every Ur-Planet they've come across. Graxes was the only one out of 11 accounts featuring Ur-Planet heroes who survived. Just one. But…"

She touched his cheek. "You're right… They weren't anything like you," she said softly.

He didn't know if it was arrogance to think that he could handle the challenge—he didn't know the true Level of the creatures down there. And he had to know he could lose. He couldn't be stupid.

But if there were ever a challenge tailor-made for him, it would be one where the stakes were high. And the rewards, even higher…that was where he thrived. He and Reina both knew it.

Reina was a little worried. But her belief in him had never been shaken. He wasn't sure it could be shaken; when Zane read her emotions with Sage Mind, it felt as solid as a mountain. Stronger than any belief he had ever felt from anyone.

They lay there for another few hours, just murmuring.

***

Evan and Avery had both absorbed their Bloodlines. They'd both hit Level 199 now too. They were on the verge of breaking through to

Core, like Reina.

The event she was organizing was getting close—there they'd all do it at once, it was decided.

While they waited they went on a side quest.

"We're off to the South Pole!" Avery declared one day. She wore a big Captain's hat. Evan nodded happily. He wore a big scarf that covered most of his face but Zane could tell he was beaming.

"We're gonna go see penguins!" Evan exclaimed.

They were going to do this because Evan loved penguins.

They set off.

A few days later, they came back. They did not find penguins. However, Avery brought home a consolation prize because Evan was getting sad.

"Tadaaaaa!" said Avery. "Meet Reginald."

It was, as far as Zane could tell, some kind of unusually large rat.

Superbara
Essence Level 103

"I believe this is what the System made of the Capybara," said Reina after inspecting it. "That's… fascinating."

It was huge, like a small truck. It was fluffy. It shambled around. It did nothing of use that Zane could see. Most of the other creatures were friendly with it—it was quite a chill creature.

Evan was delighted with it. It was a creature that could receive hugs 24/7.

"Interesting fella, isn't it?" said Avery, inspecting it. "I'm pretty sure it has no Skills. It's useless!"

"How is it alive," said Zane.

"Well—here's the thing," said Avery. "There's no such thing as a Charisma stat. But if there were, it would be maxed. It has no thoughts going through its head at all times. It's great!"

He blinked at the rodent. It blinked back at him.

"Hm," said Zane.

"I knew you two would get along!" said Avery.

***

A week later, the representatives of every elite Faction in the world—including almost every top World Ranker—portaled into the Arctic Circle. From there, through various ship treasures, they made their way to the North Pole.

The Luminous Faction was hosting a very important training camp, featuring a lecture from one, Zane Walker. Nobody wanted to miss it.

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200. Core Summit (II)

It was an exclusive camp. Every top-200 World Ranker got an invite. So did the bigwigs of every major Faction. Reina had a full list—it was a who's who of the most powerful humans alive.

They chose a big ice sheet in the middle of nowhere for the same reason scientists chose an empty desert to test nuclear bombs. It was a lot of nowhere. Lots of room for bad mess-ups.

Reina also liked how it looked. The endless stretches of ice gave her a bittersweet feeling. Like melancholy, she said to him. She got in weird moods sometimes. She liked watching the sunsets here. Evan advocated for it too, in case they came across any other penguins. Reina pointed out that penguins don't live in the Arctic. But Evan said maybe the Change changed things. He clung onto hope.

So they were here now. No one wore anything special—especially after they got their new bloodlines, the sub-zero chill might as well be room temperature. And there were no Monsters here either. The North Pole was made up of enormous A-rank Safe Zones controlled by a joint task force. A task force made up of World Rankers from two regional hegemons: Valgard Shieldbearers of Scandinavia and the Queensland Guard of Canada. It was called the Arctic Alliance. Jarl Erik of Valgard had come to pick Zane's crew up—he greeted Zane with hearty slaps on the back. He'd dispatched a handsome longship to bear them to the training grounds. The crew were all very friendly.

They were happy to host the event. Their World Rankers wanted in on the workshop too. It wasn't every day Zane Walker hosted a lecture, they said.

Actually Zane was pretty sure this was his first time teaching. Outside of his little morning sessions, that was—and wasn't sure he could count those. He wondered if this was the best idea.

He had to be realistic. He knew he was not great at expressing himself. But Reina said she would help him out, which gave him some reassurance. It was often quite hard for others to get him, but Reina understood him very easily—sometimes just by glancing at him. If she was helping with the communicating, they'd be just fine. She had this magical power to make everyone listen to her and understand her and like her. Sometimes he could swear it was some kind of soul Skill. But no. She was just that woman.

***

It would take place in the evening. The reception took place on a miles-long float of ice, where a sumptuous meal was laid out – Reina's chefs had been hard at work, making meals out of A-grade Monster flesh drops. They spanned long rows, buffet-style tables. Foods from every cuisine you could think of. Dozens of mouthwatering scents mingled in the air.

Evan and Avery went out searching for penguins.

Soon they started rolling in—starting in the early morning. Reina was out there being a good host, all winning smiles, welcoming everyone like they were old friends. Zane was just kind of there. Being there.

Zane was surprised how many came. Half of them came on longships and galleons, supplied by the Canadians. The other half on the backs of giant tamed whales—mostly Europeans. Valgard had fleets of them.

***

He saw lots of familiar faces. The first to arrive was Vanessa Volkova, at dawn. Her mind felt different to him than last time. Somehow colder, gone to ice. It wasn't just toward him—it was in general. She was very polite though. She gifted him a hunk of spirit steel—S-Grade, which Reina graciously accepted. It seemed the norm these days. She gave him a curtsy and a long complex look—then drifted away with her bear-cloaked retinue.

Then came some more Europeans. Nova Roma's representatives, a suave mustached bunch, clasped Zane's hands—they seemed very excited to be there. Excited to meet him. They brought some choice sweets for him and Reina—which doubled as rich essence treasures.

Behind them was the new French #1, Maxime Legrande, a Light Mage who came draped in an expensive-looking purple robe. He gave Zane a deep bow too. His gift was an S-ranked rune treasure that'd briefly severely buff the durability of anything, given sufficient essence. It was for Zane's training rooms—to help them withstand his power. As a matter of fact Zane had been in need of this.

Reina hadn't told anyone to bring gifts of course. But it seemed like everyone felt they had to show their respect to him.

Then a lot of the Asian Factions arrived—the Korean #1, World Rank #27, Jin Seo, a Level 184 tall, long-haired archer. Supposedly the best Wind fighter in the world, and the second-fastest behind Evan. He could nail the wings of a fly from hundreds of miles away. He brought Zane a gift too—an S-grade Meteorite Ore. Everyone knew he wanted Steel now apparently. He smiled, thanked Zane graciously for inviting him, and went off hunting whales with his troupe. He'd be back before the evening session began.

Lots of familiar faces followed. Brazil's Cristina Dos Santos, China's Jian Shi Ming. They brought him S-ranked essence treasures and metals. The hegemon of Southeast Asia, Somsak Srisuwon, who wielded wicked curved moon knives, gave him a vial of Nüwa's Tears—an S-ranked treasure that would help Zane recover from soul fatigue faster.

Lots of useful stuff.

Soon chatter spilled over the ice floats. After paying their respects one by one, the World Rankers spread out. They talked over shared wines, talked amiably—there was a general mood of lightness. Folks were still basking in the relief of avoiding impending doom. He saw Yuki the Sky Painter—who had gifted him a bushel of S-rank True Dragonfruit—sweet-talking a blushing South African girl ranked in the mid-30s.

Eze soon got there too. Zane was relieved. Neither of them were particularly chatty or social people. But with each other, they were comfortable going back and forth in short, clipped phrases, sometimes grunts, sometimes long silences, and that was fine. He clapped Zane on the back and strode off. But not before gifting something for Reina. An S-rank rune that would strongly buff any armors she wore. Zane was quite grateful.

Soon a surprise guest came. D'Angelo Hall. Reina was dithering on whether to invite the Empire Faction or not—but they represented such a huge swathe of America and had tons of World Rankers in their ranks. It would be good for humanity. But she looked to Zane. Zane shrugged. So she sent it. They didn't think he would actually come.

D'Angelo was greeted with silence from everyone else. They all remembered the few who didn't show up to humanity's last stand. But if the man cared, he didn't show it. He shrugged, sought out some caviar and wine, and ate alone. It wasn't truly fair—it was Jason who made the decision to stay home and barricade themselves in. Look out for themselves. But that was Jason for you, and D'Angelo didn't care much either way. So he went along with it.

D'Angelo was quietly World Rank #3. It was Jason who did most of the fighting, but out of the two of them, Reina said, it was hard to tell who was truly stronger. D'Angelo fought weird—his Signature Title was 'Fourth Dimension.' When he threw his shots, you could never see them coming—they hit you out of nowhere at all. Basically unblockable.

But he seemed a nice enough guy. He kept Jason in check. And he was very polite when he greeted Zane and Reina.

By late afternoon the Pacific Islanders, Aussies, Kiwis, and North Africans started showing up—the float was getting crowded. By then it was almost easier to name people on the World Rankings who weren't

there. Even those who were 20 or 30 Levels away from Core would find this useful. And they could share it with their Factions too.

Cain Hastings and a bunch of other Europeans had drifted off to another float. They started playing fireball soccer against a squad composed chiefly of South Americans. Cristina Dos Santos captained the other team. She almost got into a fistfight with German #1, Gunther Schwartz, after a bad foul—Reina had to run in to break it up.

A few stray World Rankers showed up too. World Rankers without a Faction, who struck out alone. World Rank #24, Leonidas Makris, had been one of Nova Roma's leaders—but he'd split off after some internal squabbling. He was a delicate-looking man who wielded a harp as his Spirit Weapon. There was World Rank #16, Lucia the Beast Queen, who had cracked the Top 20 only recently but had a meteoric rise. She lived on her own private island off the coast of Argentina; she flew a dragon to get over. She was accompanied by a small nest of the creatures. All kinds of dragons. Some long-necked and small-winged, some fat and big-winged, some snorting frost, some smoke.

All the best of humanity, in all their varieties, had come to hear him speak. Zane was just surprised by how he was received. Even the proudest of them—and these were World Rankers, very few lacked for pride—bowed to him, or inclined their heads, and made their offerings.

It was like the greatest summit of World Leaders there were, summoned by his call. Reina observed that you could see how everyone stood—the hierarchy—by the way they looked at each other. Some, like Eze, got a lot more reverence than others. If humanity was a kingdom, and this was a royal ball, these were the nobles. He and Reina were kept busy that whole time—folk just kept coming up to them, making conversation. Reina handled most of it with grace.

She looked to Zane from time to time. She didn't need to say anything. She just stroked his arm gently. She was proud to be queen. And everyone knew who the king was.

They had all come to pay tribute. Zane had accumulated nearly a hundred A-grade treasures, and nearly forty S-grade treasures, by the end of it.

***

Evening had come. It was time for Zane to speak. All the chatter had died down—everyone was turning to him.

They all gathered before him, ranged in a wide grid. Reina had set it up this way—she'd marked out their spots with mats. "Please sit," she asked, and they did. Hundreds of gazes looked to him burning

with eagerness, with curiosity.

"Today's subject," said Reina, voice clear and bright. "Is the formation of the Seamless Core. It's what gives Zane his uniquely powerful essence. Essence that he used to vanquish the Monster Knight."

You couldn't get more rapt attention than this.

"It takes a huge amount of practice, and soul Skill. I want to set expectations. Zane's soul is special. It's unlikely you'll be able to achieve the exact grade of Core he has—yes, even you, who are the most talented in the world. *But*." She paused, waiting for the noise to settle, hands raised placatingly. "Even getting close to that grade will make a world of difference. It'll make your essence, pound-for-pound, as strong as that Minotaur's. If not stronger."

Lots of murmurings at that.

Reina waited for it to calm down. "First," she said. "Zane would like to lead us through a hands-on exercise. It'll help us understand the Core Formation process. Zane, if you will?"

Zane nodded.

There was actually another reason they selected the North Pole.

He sat down on the mat, in front of all these world leaders. Pinched together some snow. And started rubbing it together. The snow here was from an A-ranked dungeon—laced through with Laws of Ice. It wouldn't shatter easily and held together well.

Baffled silence.

Soon he had a ball.

"Today," he said. "We are going to make a snowman."

Those top World Rankers—stately, dignified folk—looked at one another, wondering if he was joking.

But it was clear he was not. He kept packing on snow. Diligently, layer after layer. All peaceful.

It said something about the kind of regard they held him in that in the end, not a single one of them questioned him.

Soon everyone started doing it. Two hundred world leaders—everyone from Emeka Eze to Vanessa Volkova—just sat there. Studiously rolling up balls of snow.

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201. Core Summit (III)

When planning for the lecture, Zane and Reina had discovered a basic problem.

Most of what Zane knew, he didn't know. Consciously that was. It was like riding a bike. He didn't know how he did it, he just did it. It was all deeper down.

When Zane was trying to teach Reina during their test run, his advice mostly amounted to, 'just do it,' and then being confused why she could not do it. They tried it with Avery and got the same result. He kept telling Avery to keep doing it, and she kept getting grouchier, until she kicked him in the shins. She spent a while yelping clutching her foot.

At this point he realized it was probably a *him* problem.

It became quickly clear that they would have to find some other way to convey what he knew. He had to give his 'students' the kind of intuition he had.

The only way to get Core Formation was to feel it, Reina thought. She helped brainstorm with him. She ended up designing a series of games meant to represent the stuff in his brain. The games would go up in complexity until it was nearly the real thing.

They tried it again with Avery once she had settled, and it worked, and Avery declared that it was a miracle. She gave Reina the title of 'Zane Whisperer.' …This was not wrong, Zane thought.

***

Come lesson time, he did his thing.

He started patting down the snowball. Getting each layer smooth as could be. It wasn't exactly like essence but it had a close enough feel. That was why they chose it.

"Pay attention to how Zane's patting it to get the air pockets out," said Reina by his side. She started giving analysis, picking out details Zane usually didn't even pay attention to. "You want to make sure there's no bumps. Each little bump gets matted over and over as you go. That imperfection will only stay—and grow—as you build the rest of the snowman."

"We must make perfect balls," Zane agreed.

The World Rankers did not get where they were because they were silly folk. They caught on pretty quick.

As they went, their snowballs growing bigger, Reina kept bringing their attentions to other insights. Specific cues to look for, or signs

that problems might be forming. And ways Zane would address them.

Before they started all this Reina had had Zane make ten snowballs. Then she observed him very carefully. She took note of all the little things he did by feel to make sure each layer was right. Her memory was so good she didn't need to pause to write things down—so she could put 110% focused attention on him. It was fascinating watching her work. He could almost hear all the gears turning in her head—he got the impression she was picking every little thing up.

She was so smart. It put a warm feeling in Zane's chest.

In testing, she'd given him little variations. Got him to paste that unusually thick heavy layer on his hands, like a dense sheet of essence and see how he worked out the smoothness. She'd given him a layer with an ice chip in it, which would simulate a knot of essence and see how he circled around it to smooth it, nodding all the while.

He'd felt kind of like some ape in its natural habitat, and she was a researcher noting his habits or something. He found it kind of funny.

By the end of it she'd gotten most of his instinctual knowledge out in the open. Now—knowing it was not the hard part. Doing it was. But with that knowledge, she could make herself a master coach—basically the translator of Zane's subconscious mind.

Otherwise it would have been pretty impossible.

***

Reina started dropping in more little tips as time went on, and the snowmen started taking shape. She started getting them thinking about using their souls the way they were using their hands. Just visualizing it for now.

The World Rankers picked things up fast. An hour in most of them were making pretty darn good snowballs. Following the Zane way.

***

"Next game!" called Reina after an hour. She clapped her hands.

So far things were going pretty well, Zane felt. He saw lots of solid snowmen. Lots of ready students.

Now they were going to make another snowman. This time with closed fists.

A fair number of the World Rankers—who had completed rather impressive snowmen, some of which had scarves and stick-arms and steel pipes for noses—were a little reluctant at first to give up their creations. They had worked so hard.

They were also baffled. Why closed fists? Reina explained that in the astral plane, the joints of their soul couldn't articulate the way fingers could in the physical plane. The only way they could manage fine control was with a specific Skill—Zane's Emperor's Soul. But that seemed something exclusive to Zane.

Most seemed to accept it. They went at their new snowmen for a

bit. It was a lot harder this time—some took half an hour of failing over and over only to make a sphere full of lumps.

Less fun, but most of them committed to getting it right.

***

This one was a lot more of a grind, though.

An hour in, Zane heard a groan. It came from one of the teenaged monks from the Shaolin Temple—a young Chosen of theirs the Spitfire Monk had brought along. His name was Xiaolong. He kicked his lumpy snowman over.

"This is stupid. Why can't I do it how *he* does it?" whined Xiaolong.

Reina blinked. She tried to be diplomatic. "Zane came upon his Skill due to the unusual nature of his soul," she said. "It's best not to rely on that."

The teen frowned. He lifted his chin. "Miss Torres, I assure you I am extremely talented. More than enough. Teach me the Skill."

He spoke like he was used to people—likely his servants—obeying him instantly.

"I'm certain you're talented," said Reina, nodding. "I'm afraid we're not set up for that, though. Let's stick with the lesson plan for now, alright?"

This did not sit well with the teen. "Excuse me? You don't seem to understand who you're dealing with. I am Xiaolong Shen, a Chosen of the Shaolin Temple!"

He waited, as though Reina would suddenly give in. When Reina didn't his frown deepened. Meanwhile his fellow monks seemed mildly horrified by his outburst. They tried pulling him down, but he shook them off.

"Master Spitfire says my soul is among the best in the world. If *he* can do it—" he nodded at Zane. "So can I! If you insist on continuing to waste my time with these stupid games—"

Clink!

It was the Spitfire Monk himself. He had flicked a bottle cap off the boy's head. It didn't do any damage—just got the boy's attention. Xiaolong blinked at his Faction leader confused.

"Have you finished making an ass of yourself? Or would you like to embarrass our Faction further?" said the Monk dryly.

Xiaolong looked shocked. "But—"

"I said you compared to the best in the world in soul talent—I did not tell you to go comparing yourself to *Zane freaking Walker*! Fool boy," said the Monk, scowling. He burped.

The boy looked baffled. "But—"

"Open your third eye! Look at him in the Astral plane."

The teen did—it seemed to take a moment for him to adjust. When

he did get a good look at Zane he went quite pale.

And to be fair—this Xiaolong did have good soul talent. It was a little over A9. It wasn't wrong to say he did rank among the best in the world. It was just that his soul still only went up to about Zane's belly. The little guy was staring up at him with his mouth wide open.

"Oh," croaked the boy. "Oh god."

"Pssh," said the Monk. "That is the problem with you, child—you are so full of hot air, because you have not seen anything. You don't know how big the world truly is—now you know! Do not speak to me about talent in the presence of this man." He nodded to Zane, then back to Xiaolong. "You've embarrassed me enough. Go back to camp. I will deal with you when I return."

Chastened, flushing, the boy scurried off.

The Monk turned to Zane, looking awkward. He set down his wine bottle and bowed. "I must apologize, Master Savage Sage—my disciple is young and foolish… It was high time he was humbled. I will have a word with him."

"It's alright," said Zane. He didn't care. Still—other top World Rankers seemed to be bending over backwards to avoid even the possibility of offending him. That was pretty new.

***

They were all diligently making snowmen. A few hours in about a quarter of them had gotten one knuckle-snowman up to standard.

Most of the top World Rankers managed it. Vanessa had the most interesting time of it—she was constantly frowning at her snowman. Probably because her first instinct was to have the snow make itself. She had to constantly make herself not influence the snow. It was very confusing for her, but she managed it in the end.

She made a pretty little snowman of three perfect spheres.

She narrowed her eyes at it, though, like it had betrayed her. "Hmph," she said once she finished up.

The key was to be patient with it. A bunch of them just gave up after an hour of failed attempts—they started watching other World Rankers try theirs. At least they would have the knowledge of it to take home.

Maxime Legrande, the Frenchman, was clean-shaven with luscious locks of black hair. He seemed quite a sophisticated, mannered guy when he met Zane. When he first started out he wasn't very comfortable making snowmen—like he was only used to holding teacups and dessert spoons. Not blobs of snow. His white gloves kept slipping on the stuff.

But two hours in he had thrown off his rich velvet cloak. His gloves were gone too—he had whole piles of snowballs beside him. He was grinning like a boy again, spinning perfect snow globes on his

fingertips. He had done the best of the lot. Zane would later learn he had A5 leveling talent but A9 soul talent.

"Show-off," snorted one of the British cultivators. "Prick," said the Brit beside him.

Maxime looked over side-eyed. "From the football I gathered you had clumsy feet—but you would expect nothing more from Englishmen."

He gave the Brits' snowballs a once-over with aristocratic disdain. "It seems you have clumsy hands too. Master Walker's methods require finesse! I'm afraid it is quite beyond you."

"Why, you—!" spluttered the Brit. "You— you take that back! Or—or else—"

"Clumsy with words as well, I see—tsk-tsk." Maxime smoothed back a lock of hair and strode off, leaving them fuming. They were almost ready to go after him, but Cain Hastings put big hands over their shoulders and shook his head.

Cain was having a better time of it. He kept breaking his at first, and was sweating the whole time, but he did not give up. He kept muttering, impressive mustache twitching, and throwing himself back into it.

In the end his snowman wasn't too bad—better than average. A little chunky but it had character. Cain puffed up with pride at the sight of it.

***

"Alright, everyone," said Reina, after most had either given up or finished. "It's time for the final progression. I should warn you—this one could get dangerous. You'll need to be extra careful."

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202. Core Summit (IV)

The last hardest game Reina came up with was to do it all over again. This time in the Astral Plane.

Less than a quarter of the World Rankers remained to try it. Mostly the ones with the most powerful souls.

This time they would use essence in place of snow. They'd pack it the way they'd packed snow—the shaping would use the same principles.

They wouldn't use any Skills they already had though. That would give the essence structure. They would go into it raw—using just their bare souls.

It'd be a new kind of hard. Essence didn't stick the same as snow. But how it felt on the soul was close enough to how snow felt on the hands. The snowman made good training wheels—and it would transfer, Reina said.

The World Rankers nodded all determined. They set to work.

This time it was essence-based, so they got Skill Levels out of it—and fast. It turned out their snowman-making skills did transfer, like Reina thought. Zane nodded as he walked around inspecting his students' progress.

It was still rough going at first. Soon, the explosions started. Nothing big. Reina had told them not to use too much essence to start with, and these were World Rankers. A little blast wouldn't hurt them.

Their game faces were on. Soon most were sweating, eyes squeezed shut, trying to free-form control it. Zane could reach them with Sage Mind. It felt to them like trying to shape water into a ball at first—it just wouldn't stay still.

It felt totally different from Zane's experience of it. Sometimes he didn't understand why things that felt easy to him weren't easy—if he didn't have Sage Mind, he might be mystified forever. When he really looked into things, it almost felt like he and the rest of them lived in different realities.

Life was just a lot easier when you were big, he supposed. This only reinforced yet another one of his general life philosophies: become as big as possible. One can never be big enough.

He had a lot of these little quotes now that he thought about it. He should write a book. Or maybe get Reina to write it with him. Yeah. That sounded like a better idea.

Anyway.

Soon a few of them were really starting to get the hang of it. Eze was packing lump after lump of Earth essence in, rounding it out into a pretty nice-looking ball. D'Angelo Hall had a shadow-sphere going. The Frenchman Maxime was weaving together a nice circle of light.

They started Leveling in a Mortal-grade Rare Skill—'Essence Shaping.' It wasn't Core Formation. But it was something close. Reina was confident there would be transfer.

As the hours went on—and more and more of the World Rankers got the hang of it—Zane was pleased with their progress. It was kind of strange—he knew all these techniques. They were all trying to imitate how he formed his Core. It was like seeing a bunch of not-quite-hims' on a loop.

Some of them, like Eze and Yuki, got pretty close to him. They did lack a certain… heft. Though. Their technique was similar. Honestly maybe better than Zane's. But Zane could simply sit on essence in a way they couldn't, which made a bigger difference.

Size matters. He nodded. This was another wise saying from Zane.

He was pretty sure it would be good enough though.

He supposed they were about to see.

***

This little training camp would last one more day.

Reina said that only those who had reached Level Max in the basic Shaping Skill should move onto the final step. The rest could finish up on their own time.

That left just a few top World Rankers, mostly—Eze, Cristina, The Spitfire Monk, Yuki, D'Angelo, Maxime, and so on. Also a few random World Rankers with big souls—a gruff German archer named Gunther. And Lucia, the Argentine Beastmaster. Zane supposed you needed a big soul to be able to control so many dragons.

They called it a day. Most of them were eager to get going tomorrow. Yuki came up to him. He had long hair and pretty delicate features. He could've been in one of those pop bands before the Change, Zane thought. "Walker-sensei," said Yuki. "Your instruction has been invaluable to me… I had never thought there were so many little intricacies in such a simple technique. Without your guidance I would never have gotten them. Thank you."

He gave Zane a deep bow.

"No worries," said Zane. Honestly Zane didn't know there were so many little details either. Reina was the one who dug it out of him. From his perspective he just kind of did it.

Yuki wandered off.

Zane blinked.

Everyone was getting better together.

He hadn't expected it—but he kind of felt like how he had back in

the Luminous Faction.

A warmth. He felt it in his chest. Something like pride? He looked over at everyone trying so hard, together. He saw lots of the same folk who had answered the call to drive back the Monster horde.

This was Earth. His home—he had never given much thought to it before. But now that the Universe opened up, more and more, now that he started coming in contact with these big forces trying to take it from him… it did start to feel a little different. He scratched his head.

Zane did not think of himself as someone who had a strong allegiance to any particular group. Definitely not at first. Now it was just his friends he felt strongly about. But there was a part of him he was growing more aware of. A part that thought of him as a man of Earth. Someone who stood up for it when it was in danger of going down, when no-one else could stand up for it. This was, he felt, his home, after all.

It was nice to help out.

***

The next day, the top World Rankers came back to the training field. There they found thick rune circles drawn out against the snow. They were for those few who were ready to graduate to the real thing.

Reina and Zane would personally oversee their advances.

The Luminous Faction didn't have the best artificers. But Reina had requested that the Japanese and Germans, who had specialty workshops, bring their best Artificing Masters with them. They worked together to make simple but robust quarantining wards. So the worst of the explosions got contained.

Though it shouldn't come to that, Reina assured them. If she had prepared them all well. She was a little nervous, but not any more than usual.

Bright that morning, nearly thirty of the best in the world sat down in their little rune circles. They almost seemed a little uncertain about this, which was strange to see—then again, it was a big jump. Zane encouraged them. Told them it was fully within their powers. If they could shape their essence spheres as well as they had, he was sure they would do well.

Somehow his words got through to them, even more than Reina's.

They closed their eyes. They got to work.

Attempting what might be the biggest power jump in human history. They took their elixirs, Law Fruits, treasures—each one of them was loaded. They lacked for nothing there. They closed their eyes, and went for it.

Eze, D'Angelo, Lucia, Maxime, Gunther, some Eastern European and Asian Warriors, a Kiwi Archer, a handful of Scandinavian and South American Rogues and Fire Mages …One by one their circles lit

up with aura. Various kinds of essence, some hot, some cold, some thick and slow, some light and playful, swirled around them.

And their auras began to flicker. Began to thrum with the beats of their hearts—and just from feeling them, you could get a sense of who they were. The purest expressions of their souls. Their very Cores.

Their souls began to flex, strain. Zane could see them starting to work at it in the Astral Plane, layering on essence over essence. Reina had thought about whether or not to give pointers as they went, but in the end she stayed out of it. She didn't want to distract them.

It was too delicate a process. Best not to risk it. Their heads started beading with sweat. The first few minutes were the most tense. But soon, half an hour passed—no explosions. Then an hour. Two. Three—and though some of their Cores weren't perfect, all of them knew what they were doing.

Zane had taught them well.

He kind of felt like one of those wise old masters right now. Except he was neither wise nor old, now that he thought about it. And he wasn't really a master of anything either. He wondered if you could be a master of smashing things. It didn't take all that much skill. He just had to be bigger than the other guy.

Anyway.

Soon, the first top World Ranker broke through. The most talented of them.

There was a fierce rush of wind. A flash of sky-blue light, blinding, intense. And at first, both Zane and Reina thought something had gone wrong. But there was Yuki the Sky Painter, floating on a cloud of his own essence. And his core shone strong and bright, like the morning sun. Playful, light, swift—showing who he was to the world. He was a lot stronger pound-for-pound than even the minotaur. Yuki gasped. His eyes shone.

It worked. It wasn't like Zane's—it was still a clear tier below. But then, Reina thought, Zane had gotten pretty much the peak possible result for any human. It was hard for her to think of Zane the same way she thought of other people sometimes.

It turned out Yuki had gotten a High Peak-grade Core. He stared at his hands. Wonder shone in his eyes. He turned to the sky, waved a hand—and a gulf stream of colored wind splashed over it, changing its face. Up above shone the Northern Lights, splitting the clouds, running a mesmerizing turquoise river down the length of the sky. It quickly faded.

Yuki came up to Zane, put his fist to his hand. "This was a wonderful gift," he breathed, smiling. "I will remember this kindness."

He drifted happily off. It just hit Zane that the boy was 16 now—if they all survived, he was probably going to go off to do interesting

things. Maybe not even on Earth. Zane hadn't really thought of this angle before. He looked out over the field of top Rankers… he supposed it was nice to build up lots of goodwill like this early on.

***

The next to finish up was Eze. There was a roar of essence. And Earth and Darkness merged within him to make a feeling of infinite depth. It felt like staring down a bottomless well… a robust, ferocious aura raged out of him. Yet also a very controlled one. A tempered one.

Like Yuki, he was also High Peak. He was also curious to test it out—he struck out for a nearby stretch of icy bank, took a casual step. And the ice ruptured violently beneath his feet. He opened up a fissure so deep you could see magma flickering in its bowels. He seemed satisfied. He gave Zane a nod, a meaningful look. He headed off with the rest of his crew.

***

One by one, Zane saw humanity flourish. Maxime the Light Mage came next. He showed the Law of Starlight, powered by his new Core essence—summoning a phantom moon in the sky, casting rays that healed friends and scalded enemies. He'd achieved a Mid-Peak Core.

Cristina Dos Santos was also Mid-Peak. She gave a slash of Steel-Wind fusion, and the harshest edge Zane had ever seen ripped through the air, slicing cloud after cloud in two, vanishing into space leaving a jagged void-trail behind… she nodded, satisfied. Like the others she came to show him her appreciation before she left. She seemed to understand this whole thing was about giving humanity a fighting chance. She vowed to make the most of it.

On and on, the results rolled in.

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203. Colossal Tendons (I)

D’Angelo Hall hit High Peak.

Light and dark blew out of him in equal measure. He stood, blinking. One pupil white, the other black.

When he powered his Skills, they seemed to defy space. Zane couldn't tell if it was an illusion—he threw his fist one way, and it came out somewhere else—seemingly with double the power. The same with an experimental kick. His body would bend in ways bodies should not be able to bend, and portal all over the place to land their shots. It was some kind of Darkness plus Light Law. It was weird. Unless you could overpower him with raw strength, fighting him would probably be a nightmare.

D’Angelo flexed his hand. Nodded. He came over to Zane before he left, said he appreciated being invited. He fought surprisingly weird, but he was surprisingly normal. He hesitated, probably wondering whether to bring up Jason, thought better of it. Just left.

Vanessa also hit High Peak, and her breakthrough brought an explosion of icy power so strong it shattered the rune circle. She seemed a little disappointed though. Like she wanted what Zane had. Zane knew it with Sage Mind—her face didn’t show much. She locked eyes with him—ice-blue meeting coal-black—curtsied, and left with her crew.

Cain Hastings hit Low Peak. But a solid Low Peak. He seemed happy with it—he seemed surprised he'd even hit that. His countrymen were enthusiastic too. Peak Core meant he stayed in the ranks of the true elites. It was important, Zane noticed, for certain countries—especially smaller ones—to have at least one world power. If only for their pride.

In the end about fifteen people got a grade of Peak. The rest got Superior. No one hit Seamless, but that was to be expected. They all immediately came away a lot stronger than they would have without this camp.

Some took six hours, some several days. They all seemed to consider the training camp well worth it, though—and Yuki’s vow that he wouldn’t forget what Zane had done for him wasn’t the only one Zane got. Not by far.

Like that, the training camp slowly wrapped up. World Rankers trickled out one by one. It was a massive success. From start to end, Reina had run a tight ship—she got everyone trained up to speed.

She'd kind of mothered humanity to success.

They had been together a while, and Zane was surprised how he could still continue to be impressed by her.

Soon the last of them finished up—Lucia the Beastmaster. The moment she did, a funnel of scarlet flame soared deep into the skies. All her dragons raised their smoking heads and roared. They flocked to her. She came out totally nude, as though rebirthed in flames—a little bright crown of it crested her brow. She kind of looked like one of those Greek sculptures of Amazon queens.

She nodded to Zane and told him in a purr that he was welcome to visit her anytime. She winked. Then she leapt up on a great green dragon and the lot of them soared off.

Reina, meanwhile, stood by with her eyes narrowed. Fuming. She watched the dragons vanish down the horizon—Zane could tell dark thoughts were brewing in her head. Like she was plotting an assassination or something. She wasn't of course.

…Wasn't she? Suddenly Zane wasn't so sure.

"Uh," said Zane. He turned her attention away with a kiss.

He wasn't really sure why she got so jealous anyway. Reina was perfect in every way Zane could think of. When she was with him no one else even registered to him anymore.

Besides. That Lucia lady was pretty, but it wasn't close. Reina was the kind of pretty that broke his brain sometimes. Zane told her so—leaving out the other lady being pretty bit. This appeased her some. Her face was still mad but she felt proud; her chin went up, like she was thinking, *that's right.*

***

It was almost time to go. Once they got back, Zane would get to eating. He'd just gotten a huge amount of treasure—and he was mostly recovered soul-wise. It was high time he went full steam ahead on his own breakthroughs. He was quite eager. Especially the Bloodline stuff.

First, though, his friends had to break through. Evan and Avery went one by one, and both hit mid-peak Core, which was quite solid. Reina hit Peak—she came very close to Seamless, as close to anyone, probably because she knew more about it than anyone. But in the end, she couldn't quite make it. Zane was still very proud of her.

***

There was one more thing before they left. On the very last day, Evan and Zane went out on one last expedition. Evan had still not given up on finding a penguin friend.

They searched, and searched, and searched. No luck. Then—late in the afternoon, when Evan was starting to get a little disappointed—they spotted a white-and-black head popping up on a distant iceberg.

Evan lit up.

"*Penguin*!" he gasped. Zane had never seen a single person filled with so much pure joy. His head went totally empty. It was just the word 'penguin' bouncing around in there.

This gasp, however, startled the penguin. It dove into the water and swam away at a speed Zane did not know penguins were capable of. Evan cried out as it vanished.

They both stared at the spot, trying to work out if they'd just imagined the thing.

"Uh," said Zane.

He waved a hand in front of Evan's face. Evan was frozen mid-gasp. He seemed to have short-circuited.

After he came to his senses, he was a little disappointed. But in the end he circled around to being happy.

"Penguin," said Evan happily.

***

Then came the big, long grind—for everyone.

Lots of top World Rankers all around the globe hunkered down at once. And got to work. That meant training their Skills and Inheritances and Bloodlines. For Eze, for instance, it meant doubling down on his Golden Lion bloodline. Hammering that Inheritance, making the most of that Godbeast power and strength and explosiveness. Tempering his body skin-to-bone so that it could achieve its complete Golden Body, flashing gold in battle.

Zane had heard Yuki had some bird Godbeast Bloodline. And Vanessa a blizzard fox Godbeast. It was a rare handful that had managed a Godbeast Bloodline—it seemed like not just anyone could absorb them. But those who found them put themselves head and shoulders above the rest.

And the more they absorbed, the greater advantage they got. Zane would work with his Titan Rhino body. Get it as close to saturated as he could. He had a list of things to run through. First his Bloodline. Also that Red Moon Pagoda, which would give him some Soul Skills, a relatively unexplored area for him. There was also the next Stormfire Concept. He was pretty sure he was coming up to some kind of checkpoint there. He felt a good way to mastering true Stormfire. The next few concepts, he felt, would likely ratchet him up considerably.

There was so much to do. He wasn't sure he could finish it all in the next one and a half months. But he would try to get through as much as he could. He had to go fast.

First, though—before he could start all that comprehension—he had to finish off his soul recovery. This would take a few weeks. A good time to pound through all the treasures he had gotten.

Legendary breastplates. Intricately carved shields that had survived

millennia of battle. Troves of imperial gold ingots, enough to bankrupt a kingdom. It all disappeared down Zane's throat.

Merging with his body. And his body only took the best of it, the purest of it—it was a picky beast. The rest dissolved to smoke.

Still though, it made for good progress.

First up, his new Epic Behemoth Muscles.

Skill up!
Behemoth Muscle II -> III
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscle III -> IV

Then his new Rare Indomitable Hide, courtesy of those three extra droplets of Bloodline.

Skill up!
Indomitable Hide IV -> V
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide V -> VI
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VI -> VII
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VII -> VIII

By the end of it, he ran a hand along his skin, and it kind of felt like running a hand along some legendary suit of armor, or some high-quality leather. It had a certain indescribable sense of quality to it. Somehow he could feel the quality even without testing it. When he did test it, he found he had a very hard time even getting a scratch on himself.

As for his muscles… there was nowhere on Earth he could safely test the limits of that now.

Right now, he was stupid hard to hurt. The only weaknesses he had lay inside. His bones and organs and tendons. Even then, he'd take care of it—soon. And there would be no softness inside him after that.

A few more days until he could get to it, though. After he finished off his Steel, he leveled.

All that essence treasure got him a good deal more. Reina contributed a few too.

Level up!
Essence Level 210 -> 211
Level up!
Essence Level 211 -> 212
Level up!
Essence Level 212 -> 213

…

Level up!
Essence Level 216 -> 217

***

And then—finally—his soul felt right. He was ready.

One morning, bright and early, he got up and made for the Warrior Dojo.

He found himself in his meditation room again. Titan Rhino manual in hand. He closed his eyes, lit up his Bloodline. Cracked the thick leather tome, was greeted by the smell of old smokey hide… soon he was in.

The third and fourth layers of the Titan Rhino Manual came in one chunk.

“So you’ve conquered Behemoth Muscle, have you?” rumbled the Barbarian Sage, scarred arms crossed. “Good! That means your body has taken well to the Titan Rhino bloodline. As with any Godbeast Bloodline, a scant few can handle it! Most can barely take a drop before they're forced to reject it. Only one whose strength of character matches that of the beast can share its lifeblood fully! You have reached the third stage. This stage requires, at minimum, four drops.”

The Sage thumped his scarred muscled chest. “Even the strong among you have started feeling the resistance of that last drop, I’ll wager—it will only grow tougher from here on out! The more you absorb, the more it’ll test your soul. For a Bloodline does not merely test the body—it also tests the will!”

The Sage then went on a rant about insecurities and mental weaknesses, which he called ‘heart demons,’ and how you had to fight against them to absorb more bloodline. Some really had to tussle with their demons to absorb these Bloodlines. The purer your soul was, the weaker these demons were, apparently.

Zane had no clue what the guy was talking about. It had gone down pretty easy for him. He simply filed it away in the rather broad category of ‘things other people had to deal with that he didn’t have to think about.’

Finally, the Barbarian Sage got to the point. “Four droplets of Titan Rhino blood opens one of the greatest power-ups yet. It goes hand-and-hand with Behemoth Muscles.”

He crossed his burly arms. “I speak, of course—of Colossal Tendons!”

Zane perked up.

“They make the foundation of the Titan Rhino’s movements,” said the Sage. “Before even the muscles themselves! They, more than anything, govern the Rhino’s explosive power!”

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204. Colossal Tendons (II)

“Today I’ll tell you two secrets. The first is a great strength of the Titan Rhino. The second its greatest weakness. Listen well! If you were meant to wield the Titan Rhino's power, you likely share this weakness.”

Zane frowned at that.

“I certainly do.” The Barbarian Sage thumped his bare chest. “I have the scars to prove it.”

His body was riddled with them. Ugly black things. Some went a finger deep—deep ridges of flesh carved out of his biceps, his legs, he’d never get back.

Zane had always wondered how they hadn't healed. He had a feeling it wasn't because the Sage hadn’t drank a healing elixir. Maybe some scars ran so deep they could not be healed, not even with the System’s intervention.

Here the Barbarian Sage’s scarred face grew somber. “The Titan Rhinoceros’s strength,” he said. “Is its weakness. It is the most powerful beast wherever it goes! It is used to that feeling. It is an overwhelming creature. It never occurs to it that it might ever fall... and so it never knows its limits."

Hm.

That did sound kind of like Zane.

“Pride is a great thing! It drives us to victory. Yet too much of it fells even the greats. You’ll witness scenes of incredible might. But might is a coin with two sides—and the other is mortal peril.”

The Sage dissolved. A new scene colored in—a familiar one.

“You’ve seen this before,” came the Barbarian Sage’s voice.

An elven city, all pretty, shining spires of silver. And in the distance—looming beneath churning storm clouds—something that could’ve been mistaken for a mountain range. At first. Then it came closer and showed its true face.

A Titan Rhinoceros. Full-Blooded. And not just any Titan Rhino—an unusually large one even for its species.

It had been the very first time Zane had ever seen the Titan Rhino. When he’d witnessed the power of its Indomitable Hide. It had left an impression on him.

He knew he would have that power.

“I first came upon this through a scrying glass,” grunted the

Barbarian Sage. “Many lifetimes ago. Back then I was a mere Outer disciple—a heretic. An outcast in the Steelheart Conclave. I was convinced that I could harness the invincible might of the Titan Rhinoceros… back then, no creature had taken more than a few drops of its Blood and lived. But I knew I could blaze the trail.”

The Sage shook his shaggy head. “That is the curse and blessing of youth. When you’re too foolish to believe when they say something is impossible, sometimes you manage it. Bah! Observe. The power—and what follows!”

He flagged out one broad arm, gesturing to the shining silver city.

“We begin on the planet of Elensílan, in the outer reaches of the Dragonspire Galaxy. A planet ruled by the elves.”

He pointed to the walls and the little glowing shapes atop them. “All Nascent Soul cultivators. Their souls have been so deeply integrated into their physical forms the two are inextricable! All ranked in the Level 300s…”

He looked back. “But so does the Titan Rhinoceros.”

The Rhino was fast approaching. A looming mountain of muscle. More muscle than Zane had ever seen, and denser too, a sheer cliff of it. Soon it came so close he could see each tense knot bunching together, rippling with suppressed force, chaining to make the body of the beast. Each great slab of muscle a nuclear bomb of sheer mechanical power trembling to be unleashed. Thousands upon thousands chaining together—stretching—he could hear the fibers groaning, see them straining hugely under the skin, building to the greatest engine the Universe had ever known—

“A magnificent beast,” said the Barbarian Sage uncharacteristically softly. The big man was moved.

Zane was too. There was something harmonious. Something in the heart, something that resonated like a single spreading note, connecting all three of them, a pure feeling pumping hot through their hearts. Rising through their spirits. He started breathing heavily.

It was the joy of pure raw power. That joy made some shy away. Intimidated them. Not Zane. Or the Titan Rhino, or the Barbarian Sage. They dared to claim it.

“This is the City of Valithor,” said the Barbarian Sage. “The Silver Fortress! It has stood for fourteen thousand years. Empires ruled from this seat.”

Those tower peaks looked very intricate. Lots of sculptures on those domes, the kinds you might see in some old Italian church, but grander. Its streets ran on and on, paved bronze. Walls loomed proud, high, these huge hunks of Spirit Steel. Zane couldn’t fathom what grade they were.

“Lines of warrior-kings called this place home… enter the might of

the Titan Rhinoceros!"

Zane watched the Titan Rhino lower its horn. Watched it readying its charge. This time the Barbarian Sage gestured and the scene came into greater focus. The Titan Rhino's skin faded a little, grew translucent, and Zane saw what lay beneath. Thick cords of white tendons stretching between the muscles.

They looked like slingshots. Rubber-like. Incredibly strong, flexible —they kept stretching on, and on, and on as the muscles bunched tighter and tighter… the whole beast began to shiver. That raw pent-up power… Zane could almost feel the tension seeping through the scene, feel it tearing at his own heart. It felt like an unbearable load.

But those tendons did not break. Did not snap. They burned with their own shining power—and they stretched as far as those muscles could pull. Matching them one for one. Letting them load more… and more… and more…

The Titan Rhino snorted. A boiling cloud burst from its nostrils.

When it charged all that power unleashed. At once.

It shattered the sound barrier. It shattered the world itself, leaving a vast gaping void in its wake. It shattered those walls like they were tinfoil. Rammed straight through the elves and their formations... when the world itself broke, how could anything within it stand a chance? It shattered shields, brushed aside cannon fire. Bulldozed through everything.

Raw power conquered all.

That pleased something deep in Zane's soul.

Those tendons—loading, stretching, burning with Blood—imprinted in his mind. He would watch this a few times over once it was done. He would need some more examples before he was confident in trying to replicate it, he felt.

But the scene didn't end there. Instead, it shifted.

There was more.

"That was the fall of Valithor," intoned the Barbarian Sage. "For the Titan Rhinoceros it was a great success! It broke into the Elves' foundries, renowned for their exquisite craftsmanship, their fine metals, their precious raw resources... you must know that Titan Rhinoceroses and the Great Elves have a long and bloody history. The Elves would slaughter them as babes for their horns. But the Rhinos that grew old remembered. And sought revenge."

The Barbarian Sage paused.

"This particular Titan Rhinoceros was an adolescent. And it was vengeful. But soon, it grew to more than that. It grew hungry. For at Valithor it learned that Elven cities hide some of the finest stores of metals on the planet. And so it did not stop there."

The scene dissolved.

A dreamy vision replaced it.

Buildings of golden wood and silvered stone, gently glowing. Grand palaces seamlessly woven into massive oak trees. Tinkling canopies made the domes. A city built into a golden forest—so naturally it seemed an outgrowth of the forest itself. It was dazzling in the noonday light.

"Lorien'dor. The City of Golden Dreams," said the Barbarian Sage. "The second of Elensílan's great cities."

And Zane watched a mountain rumble closer.

A mountain whose eyes flashed with hunger, with greed, with rage—watched it heave its enormous power like a wrecking ball.

It compressed, and it launched—and it seemed impossible that something so huge could slingshot so fast. But it did. It blurred, a mountain moving, something against nature. And again nothing could stop it.

It ran everything into the ground. Trees toppled. Domes caved. When the Titan Rhino moved, nothing could stand against it.

"Again the Titan Rhino had its fill."

A huge shadow, slurping in the smoking ruins. "But then…"

A shaft of light fell from the sky. Struck it full. Not sunlight—a light of the soul.

The Titan Rhino paused. Looked up.

The Barbarian Sage gritted his teeth.

"A warning. From an ancestor of the planet of Elensílan. And the planet's true owner."

The Rhino simply snorted. It kept devouring. "Ignored. For why would it heed a warning, when it had never known defeat?"

That sounded like a pretty good point to Zane.

The scene shifted yet again.

"We come, at last. To Eldoria. The capital city of Elensílan."

It was a city built into a cliff. Three layers cascading over another, all old fine stone. Carved by the hands of old masters. Crystal bridges arched between them. Giant ancient trees popped up here and there, linking the strata together. It all overlooked a glittering sea. Sunset painted the waters orange.

At first, Zane didn't see the Titan Rhino.

Then the sea began to tremble.

And it rose.

Waves streamed off of it, sloshed halfway up the cliffs. And the beast came up so high it was almost level with the flood walls. That mountain, eyes gleaming…

Hungry. Burning.

The Titan Rhino snorted. Bent its great head low, that hefty horn gleaming burning red in the sunset. Readying itself to charge. And

again Zane admired the way the grand machinery of its body worked.

It was how his body would work. Seamless. Powerful. Explosive—yet building ever-higher, ever-hotter, ever-fiercer…

Then the Rhino stilled.

There was a ripple in the air. Straight in front of it. The Barbarian Sage gave a heavy sigh.

"What the Titan Rhino chose to ignore was that this planet, Elensílan, is the home planet of a certain inner-sect Disciple. A disciple of the Temple of the World Tree. A disciple deep in seclusion—who had nevertheless seen what the Titan Rhino had done."

Temple of the World Tree. That name again. Zane had read it on a lot of Alchemy Bottles. It was also where Reina's Mistress Maker title came from, he remembered—some important Faction out there.

"This Inner Sect disciple's name was Eldrin of House Arandor—yes. *That* House Arandor, the Great House of the Temple of the World Tree!"

The Sage seemed to expect that name to mean something to Zane. He continued. "This planet was Eldrin's Domain."

The Barbarian Sage's jaw clenched tight. "Eldrin could stand the Rhino no longer! Even at the risk of breaking seclusion…"

Someone stepped out of the ripples in the air. An elf dressed in simple flowing white clothes. Purple-eyed, white-haired—there was something pristine about him, something untouchable. He gave off a timeless feeling.

He shattered the world just by stepping in it. His very presence made reality unstable. It started to warp—cracks spread out from every edge around him, forking through the sky—vast chunks of sky started falling out, crashing into the seas, leaving chunks of gaping void…

The Titan Rhino frowned up at it.

Then snorted. Eyes narrowing. Roared its defiance—and charged.

The Titan Rhino charging was a magnificent sight. Whenever Zane saw it, he felt something stirring in his heart. When it moved, when every atom in its body burned with that fiery passion, that pure feeling—Zane knew he, and that Rhino, were the same kind of beast.

When it moved, it felt like the Heavens themselves couldn't stop it.

Eldrin pulled out a bow. Small thing—pearl-white, silky-soft string, almost invisible. But the moment Zane saw it he felt an unsettling lurch deep in his soul. The way you feel when you see a red hourglass on an otherwise tiny, insignificant spider.

Eldrin pulled. Calmly, precisely. And as he drew, an arrow filled the space his fingers left. Pure white.

A Bloodline Manifestation flickered over his head. The snarling head of a dragon. Dark blue scales, shining eyes, whiskers streaming

from its brow, its jaw.

"The Godbeast — the Azure Dragon. Guardian Spirit of the World Tree," intoned the Barbarian Sage gravely. "But that is not what decides things. Eldrin is well in the Level 500s. He has long since conquered the Nine Tribulations… He is an Ascended being. At the same level, the Titan Rhino ranks among the Four Heavenly Beasts. It loses out to no-one! But this…"

The Sage sighed.

Eldrin summoned a simple Skill. A Skill concentrated on the very tip of his arrow—the finest of fine points.

And when it shot out Zane sensed a dragon's aura. A Godbeast's teeth, its claws, carried on that one blazing point—along with a kind of Law, a kind of Essence, that was totally lost on him. It all made a swirling funnel. Wrapping the tip of the arrow. Spiraling down. Striking deep into the hide of the beast.

It punched straight through. It rocked the Titan Rhino to its core. Blood fountained out of it—like a lake spewing from a cracked dam. Foreign Law, foreign essence, raged within—

And still it kept rising. Kept bellowing.

"There are two hundred Levels of difference!" said the Barbarian Sage. "And yet… the Titan Rhino refuses to quit. That body, that blood—its vitality defies all reason!"

The Rhino meant to smash the elf from the sky.

The elf blinked, shocked. It quickly loosed another arrow. Then another—and another—

The Rhino kept fighting.

It was exactly what Zane would have done.

A fourth arrow and it staggered. As though drunk. It refused to put down its head.

A fifth and it was careening to the sea.

A sixth took it through the eye—and it dropped. Slumped.

And… that was it.

It was a stunning sight to Zane. The Barbarian Sage flickered up beside him—the big man looked upset too.

"I know how you feel," said the Barbarian Sage. He closed his eyes. "Let me show you one last scene."

What came next angered Zane.

Elven smiths, stringing up a bow. The curve was the same. Eldrin's Spirit Weapon. But the string was being replaced with a familiar brand of sinew—hyper-condensed. It was the Titan Rhino's colossal tendons.

"You are witnessing the making of the Colossus Bow," said the Barbarian Sage softly. "A Heaven-grade treasure. The legendary signature weapon of Eldrin, who is now a pillar of House Arandor."

One final scene. Eldrin testing the bow—pulling it. And Zane could

see even for this Level 500+ monster, it wasn't easy. He turned his eyes skyward, fired a plain, simple arrow.

And the Titan Rhino's Colossus Tendon showed its power.

That arrow tore through the fabric of reality itself. Touched the sun. It flared ferociously bright… and winked out.

Like that, day turned to night.

The scene finally ended.

***

It left Zane with a lot to chew on.

He took the Skill.

As for the advice—he thought about it a while.

In the end he agreed. And he disagreed.

The advice seemed to be, 'know your limits.'

Zane did not like to think that way. When he dug deep inside of him, he always found he could smash what everyone else thought was his limit. The parts of him that mattered… he did not believe those had a limit. Limits made for timid men. He would not be cowed by them. Not now. Not ever.

But he thought back to how that great beast fell. The path it had chosen.

So maybe the advice was—don't be stupid. Pick your fights.

Zane could agree with this.

He wasn't sure how you could hold the idea that he could win any fight you set he heart to—and that he should be smart about picking his fights—side by side. There seemed to be a break in logic there. Somewhere right in the middle.

He scratched his head.

Eh.

He was comfortable with that.

He was big. He contained multitudes.

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205. Colossal Tendons (III)

It was weird. Zane knew he was not invincible. But in a battle, he fought like he was. He would never go in doubting himself.

In his mind, once he committed to a battle it was do or die. Then belief was everything. He would always believe he could not be beaten. Somehow, in those close hard fights, that made the difference.

He could choose his fights well though. Be judicious like Reina would say.

This was not really relevant right now. There was no fight he could not pick on Earth. This place was his, and nothing and no one could challenge him here. He was sure of that.

In the future though. Once he came up against those extremely powerful beings. It was something to consider.

He knew his first instinct was to throw himself at things. He was made to fight. It was what he did—it was the core of him. Safety did not register much to him. But he had people who were counting on him now. People he had to protect. Reina came to mind first, and he felt a rush of heat at the thought of her. And Evan and Avery and some of his Faction, and even further down the growing list, Earth. His home. He couldn't afford to let any of them down.

And he would not.

He clenched his fist.

***

He felt good. Like he had untangled a knot in his mind.

Now for the meat of the thing. Colossal Tendons.

He gave the Tome one more run through, went through the gauntlet of visions. He ached deep in his heart when he saw that great Titan Rhino felled. Seeing something so strong brought low…

It would never be him, he vowed.

Then he had it.

He held the Titan Rhino's tendons in his mind. The way its Bloodline rushed through it…

It was like some dam within him broke.

And all that Titan Rhino Bloodline inside him—waiting at the edges, swirling in his muscles—broke out. Rushed down his tendons. Flooded them with new life.

He hissed.

Every joint inside felt like alcohol smearing on a wound. A heady cleansing burning. Bloodline steeped into every last joint it found,

seeking out the weakness inside him. And smiting it white-hot. Stars of pain lit up down his arms, his legs, burning up his hands, his fingers, and he could feel every little stretch of soft tissue there crying out, rippling with stabbing, searing feeling—

That pain was weakness leaving his body. He saw it. A black gunk, something lower than ash, seeping out of him like a foul sweat. It had a foul smell too—it smelled like all that was burnt and rotten.

As he sat there, taking the fire, he got why so many were bottlenecked by the Titan Rhino Bloodline.

Even Zane had to clench his teeth hard. And you could do a lot of very intensely painful things to Zane before he even grimaced.

This hurt. Not in a way where you could lie there and take it and scream a bit and be fine after. It stabbed at the soul itself. The sensation just kept spiking—like it meant to rip you apart body and spirit. White-hot tongs stabbing, stabbing, stabbing—

He knew if he let himself black out from the pain he knew it would consume him, and he would be done.

It was like this when he got Behemoth Muscle too. Only the pain seemed to get more intense the further he went. It lit up every inch of his soft tissue; he could feel it viscerally, feel it remolding him, reshaping him at the cellular level. Injecting godly levels of elasticity. Explosiveness. Springiness. Durability. Then linking together, making bigger, pure chunks, making full-sized tendons…

It was all erupting inside him, a thousand little explosions going off over and over—Bloodline and essence raging together—he groaned.

He clung on. This thing could never defeat him. He did not need to try to pretend like it was nothing; he didn't need to try to trick himself. He was confident in his soul. He stared that pain dead in the eyes, saw it for what it was, and gritted his teeth, and took it head-on.

It kept going. And going. He felt sweat and gunk mixing over his taut reddening skin, felt his jaw start to ache from the hard clenching, his fists start to ache from the clenching. His breathing was heavy, thick, deep, ragged. Sweat drip-dripped down his brow, dripped down his thick heaving chest.

Through that veil of pain he started noticing how his body was changing. Feeling the way each tendon lit up inside him—feeling a new material rising from the ashes of the old. Something that could take so much more power, it felt wrong to even compare them.

Now that the power of his tendons was made so clear to him—highlighted so intensely in his body—he was realizing his muscles had actually been limited by his body before. They did not act alone. His body was one big machine. His tendons and muscles especially gave power to one another.

His muscles could do so much. They could generate a huge amount

of raw power. But with his tendons it was like trying to squeeze an ocean through small pipes. Godly power through a mortal conduit. It was a mismatch. He could make do with it. And when he revved up hard, he could force the flow of power to go faster and faster—but what happened when he broadened those pipes? When he blew them up to ten times the size—or more? How much more raw power could he ram through?

That was how it felt like to him. His body, unlocking. Unleashing tendon by tendon. From the little ones in his fingers, to the big springy ones in his calves.

It was glorious.

Soon, though, his breathing was going ragged. He could feel his whole body heaving. He was sweating up a storm. He found his big hands clawing into the ground, denting the steel…

It was hard to tell time in all this hurt. But it had to have been a while. He frowned. He could really feel it starting to weigh on him now.

It had not pushed him to his limit, though. So far he had found no raw pain enough to do that. And if he did get to his limit he would find it inside him to surpass it. Even as the pain stacked on, and on, and on, his confidence never wavered.

He *would* make it through.

Until—

Skill comprehended!
Colossal Tendons (Passive) [Rare (E)]

He let out a long, deep, dragging breath.

He was like a chimney. Blackened smoke poured out of his mouth, streaming through the air.

He sat there for a bit, head raised to the sky, just panting. Eyes closed. Feeling wrung out—a good kind of exhaustion. The exhaustion of a hard-won achievement.

He felt incredible. It felt like every cell in his body was singing, flaring bright. Especially deep in his arms. His legs. His calves. That connecting soft tissue had come alive. It felt like the great engine of his body just got fitted with some new turbo-boost.

He was eager to test drive himself. See just how fast he could go from zero to one hundred now.

Slime and gunk kept sloughing off him.

Then geysers of steam started shooting at him. From vents in the ceiling, the walls, the floor—scraping off the gunk, dissolving it in a cleansing acid. Bright-blue arrays flared up all around him, sucking mightily, drawing away the black. Clearing up the muck.

Soon the room was pristine clean, white-padded walls, floors, and

ceilings again. Then there was a flux and his body got splashed with warm essence. Rejuvenating his skin. Helping replenish lost essence, helping the recovery go a bit faster after all that rush.

This cultivation room was state of the art. Reina was constantly adding new functions, custom-built to contain him. She was thoughtful like that and she knew his body better than anyone. He was a growing Zane and he needed the best facilities, she felt.

The problem was no matter how much she upgraded he kept outpacing everything. He was growing a bit too fast. Not even this E-grade planet could keep up with him. He never used his muscles full-force nowadays, unless in battle—he tried to be very careful and tender in everyday life. Things broke too easily. Even the fabric of reality here broke too easily. Just a little hint of his muscles firing made the air shiver and quake around him.

On Earth, he had become the definition of overkill. He was already at the peak. But then… he frowned. He also knew he had a long way to go. He was thinking of the vision with the Titan Rhino. The elf with the bow.

He was about to go into the Superdungeon. And that was supposed to be the quarantine of the universe. There were supposed to be corpses of old gods in the lowest floors—there were probably things as powerful as that elf hidden in those depths.

Zane doubted he would meet them. But still. He blinked at his hands.

He knew he was strong. But he did not know the meaning of strong enough. There was something beautiful, something simple, about absolute brute raw power. There was a purity to it that warmed his heart like nothing else.

He wanted more. He would never stop wanting more. This latest power-up would sate him, for now. He was very pleased. He hadn't even tried it but he could already tell it was a big leap.

It was a pity right now though—he itched to put his new power to good use. Maybe have a good old slug it out fight, get his heart going, his blood pumping hot… he looked around.

This was not the place. He sighed. Soon. The Superdungeon. He clenched his fist. Soon.

He stood, readying himself to go.

This was something of a lapse in judgment.

He forgot he just upgraded his body. He was still thinking his body would move like it had before.

It was like seeing a rocket blast off.

Zane stood up—and shot through the ceiling. Then another ceiling. Then another.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

Marble shattered. Pools of water exploded. Floors full of delicate instruments got smashed by one flying Zane body. Five ceilings, warded over to be indestructible even to him, ceilings of high-grade Spirit Steel, went up against Zane's skull.

Zane's skull won out.

In the moment though all he registered was—*Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow.*

There was a chorus of harsh clangs—his head going through a bunch of steel pipes? Vents? Then he was soaring through open air…

***

At the same time, Reina was giving a meeting in a skyscraper a few hundred feet away. A very important meeting—she had gathered all the Luminous Faction's regional leaders. She had gathered the best and the brightest she could find and put them to good use. She ran a tight ship and she was proud of it.

She was just giving her quarterly outlook—how a budget of 400 max-grade essence stones would be spent to develop new Law Area Dojos and mass-produce Soul Saunas, which would hopefully double their ranks of World Rankers in the next six months.

She was deep into conversation when she blinked. She heard a rumbling far above—a meteor? She looked behind her, through the huge floor-to-wall windows. Looked up.

A big hunk of muscle cratered right past. And smashed face-first smack-dab in the middle of the town square. There was a big *SPLAT*. A bigger plume of dust.

For a few seconds Reina panicked a bit; she thought they were under attack. Then the dust cleared and she saw a spread-eagle-shaped hole in the ground. It went pretty deep, a huge stencil, larger-than-life. A man with limbs thick as logs.

She knew that shape.

She watched her boyfriend climb out of it dust-soaked, shirtless, blinking. Looking vaguely baffled. Zane scratched his head.

The sub-Faction leaders in the conference room had all rushed up to the windows, gasping. Their eyes bulged, jaws dropped when they saw just who it was.

Shouts came from the crowd all around—luckily Zane had cast such a big shadow that everyone had had ample time to run out of the way. They were all gaping at him.

Reina blinked. Then she covered her mouth like she was trying not to laugh.

"Oh Zane," she sighed.

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206. Red Moon Pagoda (I)

Zane ran into a second building. The wall exploded in a shower of cobblestone and wood. He stomped, halting himself before he did any serious damage… Which left a giant crater in the road.

By now there was lots of staring and pointing and shouting going on. At first, folk were confused. They must've thought some homeless man had broken into their city and was wreaking havoc. Then they realized it was him and started cheering.

He looked down at himself—his general state.

…This was not a good look.

He started thinking about how much effort Reina put into making him presentable. Keeping up a good public image. He scratched his head.

Probably a good idea to go somewhere else. Before this little mess got any worse.

He leaped away.

Before the Change, he never felt his body much. Unless something was hurting. But now he felt every little part of himself intimately. His body was as much him as his soul. He could feel his tendons, his calves bunching, compressing, coiling tighter and tighter, loading up with vast wells of burst-power—then launching with a *CRACK!* of coiled power.

One moment he was standing in the midst of a bewildered crowd. The next the air was howling past him, running cool fingers through his locks as he rocketed through the clouds.

After he dropped in the middle of a forest he spent a while running into things. Mostly trees this time, thankfully. He gave a few teenagers a bit of a fright. Some dusty giant running around smashing into things—they ran screaming. But otherwise no real harm done.

Except to his face. But Zane's face was very hard, and repeated smashing had conditioned it well. It healed fast.

By now he was just used to running face-first into things. He wasn't sure what that said about him. It was kind of remarkable. Avery once theorized his face was some kind of damage magnet. Any attack that was thrown anywhere near him would somehow swerve around and smack him in the face. This was also Zane's experience of the matter.

It was a lucky thing he had a block for a head. Strong square features, strong jaw, strong bones in general. He found he could soak a lot of damage in general, but his face particularly was some kind of

heavy-duty sponge.

Which was all to say—after running through several feet-thick, layers of Spirit Steel, and a handful of walls, and more trees than he could count, he was doing mostly fine. Just smarting a bit.

Some firs and leaves still got up his nose though as he bumbled about. Lots of sneezing.

All in all, it was a successful breakthrough. He was quite pleased with it. Slowly, he picked his way back home.

He still couldn't test run his body. But that was fine.

He would have his chance very soon.

***

The only thing left for him to do was to look into that Pagoda Soul Treasure.

But for that, his Soul would have to recover. In the meantime, he didn't have much to do—he'd run out of essence treasures and steel treasures, pretty much. And the Leveling requirements for those had gotten so high he'd need higher-grade treasures to make a dent there.

Which meant there was pretty much only one way to Level now.

…He was just thankful Reina had gotten a new passive Skill from her Inheritance. It made her body very pliable and flexible, like a willow—it meant she got the endurance she needed to keep up with him. The next two weeks they went at it almost nonstop.

Level up!
Essence Level 217 -> 218
Level up!
Essence Level 218 -> 219
…
Level up!
Essence Level 224 -> 225

…

Skill up!
Mephisto's Pleasures Sutra IX -> X
Skill evolved!
Mephisto's Pleasure Sutra Common (E) -> Rare (E)

In that time, Evan got up to Level 214 and got his second Concept. Avery got up to Level 206—she was making good progress on her third Concept. Both of them were very determined to do their best to help Zane tackle the Superdungeon.

Reina, meanwhile, got up to Level 219.

When she first powered up to Core, her signature healing Skill—Architect of Restoration—had evolved into 'Maker's Touch' which was an even stronger version of an already absurdly strong Skill. With her

at his back, Zane had a hard time imagining anything at the same level taking him down.

Even Reina was surprised at how potent her Skill was—it said something about the caliber of her Mistress Maker title.

After those initial Skill gains, though—especially in recent weeks—she had her hands full with Zane.

He was quite grateful. He made her lots of omelets in this time. He was getting pretty good at it.

As for the rest of the world—he heard the same World teams that tackled the A-Rank dungeons would go for the Superdungeon Gates. It would be divided up by region. Europe and Asia; Africa and Oceania and the rest. Eze would lead one team, Vanessa another—Cristina Dos Santos yet another, and Jason and D'Angelo did their own thing. And so on.

Zane lay there in bed one early morning, just thinking. He already knew who he would have on his team. Avery and Evan. And the woman currently splayed all over him, soundly asleep. Head pressed into his neck, her ample chest slowly rising and falling against his broad one.

He looked at her fondly. She was an absolute champ. As soon as they got into the Superdungeon, she would have to do less—he would have access to stronger Leveling treasures. Until then… they agreed they simply had to keep going like this. It was for the good of humanity. There was just no other way.

Avery started wondering what the heck was going on—their Levels were shooting up too fast. Reina was Top 7 in the world now. When she heard this she gave them both the biggest raised eyebrow Zane had ever seen. She made her face the raised eyebrow emoji.

Evan, as usual, was totally unaware of what was going on, which they were all very thankful about.

***

There were 30 days until the Superdungeon.

Zane's Bloodline work was done for now. He'd need to get 8 drops to unlock the next layer, which seemed to be Bone Tempering. The Bloodline requirements seemed to double per layer.

So the only thing he had left to work on was his soul treasure.

The final treasure from the S-Ranked Dungeon. The Red Moon Pagoda.

It had fused into Zane's soul—and stayed dormant ever since, pretty much. Other than granting him a pretty strong boost to Emperor's Soul, which came in handy. Still, he hadn't made much use of it yet.

It was an intricate little thing, a crimson-and-gold tower in the center of his soul.

He could tell somehow that it was very strong. He just had no clue

what it did.

One day, after he'd recovered enough, he found himself back in the Law room of his private Dojo.

He would figure out what this thing was. And how he could use it to make himself even more powerful.

Red Moon Pagoda [Uncommon (E)]

The signature treasure of Emperor Red Moon, ruler of the Red Moon Cluster. The Emperor was a Space Pirate during the Warring Factions Era who even the Nine Great Factions dared not challenge. Wielding this very Red Moon Pagoda, he established himself as the Hegemon of an entire star system.

It was said that the Emperor could kill deities with but a glance—and all essence Skills that rose against him would inevitably fail. He could dominate a star system without moving a finger. That was the power of his soul Skills, amplified by the Red Moon Pagoda.

Each layer of this treasure stores a crucial technique of Emperor Red Moon's Soul Inheritance. Each layer unlocks upon mastering the previous.

This treasure contains seven layers.

At the first layer, this treasure is graded Earth Grade – Uncommon. Each subsequent layer grants a 10% increase to the power of Emperor's Soul.

Prerequisite for use: A5 Soul Talent, Soul Skill: Emperor's Soul

Reina theorized it was in a similar category to that of a Soul Weapon. A kind of tool that bonded to him. He could activate more and more of it as he went.

His soul was already his greatest source of strength. But so far he hadn't done much with it Skill-wise.

He hadn't even faced many Soul attacks. His body was hard to hurt, but his soul didn't have much in the way of defense. Just his sheer size. Most of the time that was enough up here, but Reina was a little concerned. They didn't know what strange old Monsters they could find down in the Superdungeon. She was worried he would face much more sophisticated Soul attacks. Things he couldn't 'big' his way through so easily.

If he could figure this thing out, Reina thought it could be big for him. He didn't know what awaited him, but it had to be pretty good, he figured, if you could dominate a star system with it.

He closed his eyes. His mind went blank.

And slowly, colors filled in.

He saw the Pagoda in his mind's eye—crimson walls etched gold, glowing softly. It started growing bigger.

He felt himself descending. And suddenly he wasn't in the physical world anymore. He stood in the Astral Plane.

All that was physical grew blurry, a haze of shifting colors. Strange red mists rose from nowhere, trickling over, veiling the world… he looked before him.

There was the Pagoda. A massive tower before him striking high into a blurry sky. It was the one sharply defined thing in this whole place. Deep-red walls with rich gold motifs—the beams struck proudly out. Carvings of dragons circled the pillars. There were seven jade-green tiled roofs, one for each floor.

It gave off an ancient timeless aura, the way some old mountains do.

At the very front there was a fat red door. Two golden knockers hung in the middle. Zane stepped up to it. He just felt he should—he felt a certain connection to this place. Like it was a second home, long-forgotten.

Sure enough—the doors opened up before him, like they were welcoming him.

He looked around, scratched his head. Then went on through.

***

The first floor was a perfect octagon. Seven red doors—each a piece of art, all scribed over with golden murals and symbols—marked each of the walls.

A red moon hung bright in the middle of an obsidian-black floor.

And atop it stood a single statue. An unkempt old man with golden rings running down his thick beard, running up his burly arms. He was grinning devilishly. But he had narrowed, intense eyes. Like he was sighting a target—and he was just about to fire.

Emperor Red Moon
Circa 9th Megannum. Level 582.
Ruler of the Tarkas System

Zane did a double-take at the Level.

582.

That was the highest he'd ever seen, he was pretty sure.

This Emperor used the treasure Zane was standing in as his primary weapon?

Right now it was just graded Earth Uncommon. But once he unlocked all the floors—just how high of a rarity grade would this thing get?

Hmm.

… He was getting ahead of himself. If it was this impressive he doubted it would be very easy at all to unlock even just one of these

layers. Much less all of them.

He went up to the first door.

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207. Red Moon Pagoda (II)

The door was set deep into an archway. A mural ran over its surface in bare gold lines. It was simple yet vivid—it almost seemed to move as Zane looked at it, like an optical illusion.

It was the Red Moon Emperor, sketched out. A bright-red disc flared behind him, a big halo. Before him stood a field of enemies. They were casting thick gold lines at him—lines that bounced right off his red shield thing.

The mural depicts the First Layer's Skill—Shield of the Blood Moon—in action.

boomed a smooth deep voice.

Zane looked around. He didn't see anyone.

Greetings. I am the Spirit of the Red Moon Pagoda.

Oh.

I was given life eons ago deep in the bowels of Steelheart Mountain, alongside this sacred treasure. I have seen the ages come and go. I have seen the Pagoda change hands between hundreds of owners… now I am yours to command. While you are bonded with this treasure, I am your guide, your servant, and your instructor.

Zane blinked.

"Cool," he said.

Carrying the Red Moon Pagoda is an honor and a burden. Of thousands of masters, all greatly talented, vanishingly few mastered its powers in full. Those that did, became Hegemons of the Dragonspire Galaxy.

Neat.

I await you behind the first door! To enter, you must will it open. Prove your command of Emperor's Soul.

It went quiet again.

Only then did Zane notice that the door didn't have a handle. But when he looked at it in the Astral Plane he saw one—a big fat gold thing, right in the middle of the door. He gave it a twist and a shove. And the whole thing rumbled. Slid aside.

Beyond lay a simple redwood staircase. It went off into the gloom, seemingly into nowhere.

Zane went on through.

It was like he'd gone into some alternate dimension. The only things that stayed were the thick red mists billowing about, snaking around his shins, hazing the distance. He thought there was a night sky overhead at first—it was all dusky grays and purples. But instead of stars, golden runes blanketed the sky, twinkling softly. Wrapping around him in some vast bowl.

Then he saw someone striding toward him. A figure coming through the mists, growing clearer.

It was an old man. The Pagoda Spirit? It was ghostly, wispy at the edges. Its faint body was colored a faint red. It was bushy-browed and long-bearded. It was very small. Then a bank of mist passed, and Zane saw it in full.

It stood there, hands clasped behind its back. Looking all stern, like a drill sergeant. Its eyes were leveled at Zane's waist. It looked like it meant business.

Then it looked up.

Its eyes popped. It went quite still.

"Hello," said Zane.

Its mouth slowly dropped open.

"…"

The Spirit blinked. Blinked again. Looked Zane up and down, toe to shin to knee to belly to head.

Hmm, said the Spirit at last. **Hmmmm.**

A pause. **You are… you seem to be…**

It seemed at a bit of a loss. Zane knew that look. He got it a lot. He scratched his head.

"…I know," said Zane.

You… are merely Level 221.

"Yes."

The Pagoda Spirit swallowed. It gave him another once-over. **You are… not a Great Ancestor of the Nine Great Factions. Nor a Patriarch, I assume.**

"No."

A prince of the Celestial Imperium?

"Don't think so."

…What are you, exactly?

Zane wasn't sure what to say to that. "I'm Zane."

…Hmm said the Spirit again. It didn't say anything after that. Just stared at him. It started walking around him, giving him a bit of a 360, getting a good look at him from a bunch of angles, frowning all the while.

Hmm.

"Uh," said Zane. It was getting a bit awkward. "So. What now?"

Ah. Yes. Err, said the Spirit. It sounded a little strangled. **As I said—I am the Spirit of the Pagoda. Think of me as your servant. Assistant. I am here to help you, the Pagoda's owner, make full use of this most venerable treasure. Here I'll teach you the first Skill of the Red Moon Inheritance.**

"Nice," said Zane.

This Skill is called the Shield of the Blood Moon, it said absently. **It is an immensely powerful technique when mastered—among the premier soul defense Skills in the galaxy…** it trailed off.

Say—are you certain you are not some sort of… a reincarnation of a Primordial Spirit, perhaps? This…

It was doing another lap around him again. Like a horse breeder admiring an award-winning stallion.

This is… this is very… A pause. **Hmm. Err—right. The shield.**

It shook its head, frowning, like it was trying to remember its script. **Err. How well you take to this Skill will depend on your… individual talent…**

"…"

…

In any case, said the Spirit, coughing. **Err. Here is how this will go. I will instruct you on how to invoke the Blood Moon Shield at a basic Level. To progress in Level, you will temper it through a series of 'Trials.' You will do this until your Shield's powers reach its maximum.**

"Okay," said Zane.

There are five Trials in total—each an exact recreation of a soul attack from a powerful monster. Each is of a varying type and increasing intensity. They are meant to be rather… err… It cleared its throat. **It is meant to be challenging.**

It gave Zane a dubious look.

Though… these trials were not equipped to fit… that is to say… it has never handled a host quite so…

Another long pause.

Hold on. You must be from an Ur-Planet.

"Yes."

Ah.

The Pagoda Spirit looked suddenly relieved. Like things were finally starting to make sense.

You are… an exceptional specimen… even by the standards of your planet, I assume. Surely.

"I guess?" He wasn't sure how he felt about being called a specimen, though.

You must be the largest of your species. By some margin, I imagine?

Zane shrugged. "I think so."

I see. I see. Yes—that… I can see how this… extremely improbable mutation… could have occurred now.

Another pause.

Right—the training, said the Spirit. **Err. Here—let me show you what is to follow.**

***

The mists before him shifted. Splashing with colors, painting a new scene, a projection. It seemed to be a very similar situation to the one Zane found himself in. Same setting, same background. Same spirit, even.

It was speaking to a different person though. The guy looked very much like the statue outside, just less wrinkly and more muscular. It had to be the young Red Moon Emperor.

The young Emperor was cringing before the Pagoda Spirit, who drew up to its full height. It was actually taller than the Emperor here.

Disciple! It boomed. **Have you steeled yourself for what is to come?**

Zane was surprised. Here it sounded much more imposing. And its voice sounded much deeper too. Maybe because it was all scaled up.

"Yes!" growled the young Emperor.

This Trial will test your will to its very limits. Fail here… and

you risk permanently crippling your spirit. Perhaps death! Do you accept this challenge?

"Yes!" roared the young Emperor again. This time with gritted teeth, eyes shining. He balled his hands into fists. "Constellation Order," he breathed. "You bastards—once I become the true master of the Red Moon Pagoda, you'll all pay!"

You have learned the Shield well, said the Spirit. It nodded. **It has been a long and arduous journey… to reach the starting line. That was merely level one. Here comes the true test. Are you ready?**

The Emperor nodded.

Then let us proceed.

The Emperor gritted his teeth.

All around him, though, mists began to swirl. Began to heat up, glow with an otherworldly crimson light.

And right above him, the air began to tremble. A terrible ghost blossomed there—a phantom creature, the flickering head of a dragon, tendrils of ectoplasm smoke trickling from its snarling lips.

It opened its massive mouth. There, lodged in its throat, was a ghastly gray-white storm. Gathering fast, shining bone-white...

It didn't feel like any normal Skill to Zane—there was very little essence in it. In the physical world at least. But in the Astral Plane it flared quite bright. If it struck you, your body would be untouched. But your soul would immolate instantly.

The First Trial, intoned the Pagoda Spirit. **Breath of the Ghost Dragon!**

The attack roared out of its throat, a translucent white tornado making landfall. Right on the young Emperor's head. He screamed, threw up his hands—and a pale red moon flared out of him. So dark you could hardly tell it was there. But it was.

Zane sensed the barest trace of a certain aura—the aura of the Pagoda. Mysterious, fathomless. Trickling out from him.

The red shield caught the raging white. And for a good few seconds, it held.

Then it cracked. Straight down the middle. Just as the dragon breath sputtered out. And the Emperor dropped to his knees, face deathly pale—he hacked out a mouthful of blood. Then another.

But the shield had taken the brunt of the blow. He'd lived.

Now heal, said the Pagoda Spirit. **Reflect. For in that attack lies the insights you need to reach the next Level. When you are**

ready, come to me once more—and take the Trial again—take it, until you can withstand it fully! For only through tempering can the Shield progress…

The Spirit paused. Softened a little. **You did well to survive that attack. Few do. There is great potential in you, Gretsis. Take a rest. Return when you are fully healed. Work hard. Master these Techniques. With some luck… you will realize all the power you wish for. And all who once scorned you will tremble.**

The young Emperor nodded. There was a fierceness in his dark eyes. "Yes!"

The scene faded.

***

Then it was just the Spirit and Zane blinking at each other again. It was a bit strange to see the Spirit at gnome-size again.

The Spirit coughed awkwardly. **…Right. That was the Red Moon Emperor. He had learned the Skill I am about to impart to you—and that was his first test of it. That is what you are in for.**

"Cool," said Zane.

The Spirit hesitated. **You may have, ah, noticed. I was much more… intense… with Gretsis. I acted as his trainer. That was what he needed to survive. Most who attempt the Trials do not survive—they need that push. As for you… again—I am rather… I don't know if… that is to say, again, this place was not designed to handle… what I mean to say is. I don't quite know what to do with you, I suppose. This is… something of a first.**

"…"

The Spirit let out a strange noise. **Well—let us run it and see what happens! I bequeath to you the signature Soul Defense Skill of the Red Moon Pagoda. The very Skill which Gretsis there would one day use to rebuff the ultimate Soul attacks of even Great Faction Patriarchs—Shield of the Blood Moon!**

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208. Red Moon Pagoda (III)

The words **SHIELD OF THE BLOOD MOON** appeared in devilish red letters over the spirit's head.

The mists thickened. Another vision flashed into view.

Disciple! It was the Spirit, big again here. **It is time to learn the foundational technique of the Red Moon Pagoda. Unlike most techniques, it does not merely make use of your own essence. It wields the Red Moon Pagoda itself! Which makes the Blood Moon Shield a uniquely potent Skill. If you max out its Level, the Pagoda itself will fail before you take Soul damage—and this Pagoda… Let us put it this way. I could count on one hand the number of old monsters in this galaxy who could threaten it.**

The Spirit snorted. **It was forged at the behest of the Celestial Emperor five Chaos Cycles ago!**

To Zane's right, the present-day Spirit coughed. **Five-and-a-half now.**

The vision-Spirit kept going. **It is made from the highest caliber Heaven-Grade Spirit Steel. Every strand of it tempered and infused with the Concept of Everlasting by Patriarch Diamondfist himself! If you can master it fully it is no exaggeration to say you'll never need to worry about soul attacks again.**

It paused as though to let that sink in.

But there is a reason this treasure is graded so low, relatively speaking, as of now. Nearly all its powers are shackled. What you see is akin to the tip of an iceberg whose depths scrape the ocean floor. Indeed, it is the unshackling of the Red Moon Pagoda which is the difficult part. Be warned, disciple! Even those with immense talent find this the most difficult challenge of their lives—it may take years, perhaps decades, to master even the first level—

The scene abruptly ended. The present-day Spirit gave another awkward cough. **The rest is merely a few such disclaimers. We can skip that part—not relevant here.**

Zane nodded.

Very well, then, said the Spirit gravely. **Close your eyes, and I**

shall impart to you the Skill in full. Since the Pagoda is bonded to you, I can transmit the knowledge directly to your mind. This means will allow me to grant you the Skill, up to Earth-Epic… beyond that will require real-world Trials. Let us begin.

Zane closed his eyes.

The Red Moon Pagoda would like to impart to you:
Skill: Shield of the Blood Moon
Accept?

Zane did.

And his head burst open with knowledge. With history. A flood of it blurring before his eyes. Scene after scene.

He saw a Titan who must've been hundreds of feet tall, wielding an enormous golden hammer made to fit him. A hammer wrapped in bands of Law and essence. They swirled about it like rings around a planet.

The Titan groaned and smashed, and a sea of sparks flew high. High over an anvil set in a lake of lava. And in the middle of it—coming to life—a pagoda. Taking slow shape… a disc of bloody-gold light blossomed out of it. Zane felt the Pagoda inside him flare in recognition.

That was the first instance of the Shield of the Blood Moon, he realized. That halo-thing. He paid close attention.

Skill learned!
Shield of the Blood Moon [Common (E)]

…That was easy. This learning took almost no effort at all. Maybe because it was transmitted directly.

Then he realized—he had only learned the very beginning of it. The scene kept going. He kept paying attention.

He saw the Titan collect the treasure gingerly, between two fingers. Kneel. Drop it at the feet of an old dwarf overseeing it all from a high ledge. A dwarf with eyebrows so bushy you couldn't see his eyes. The dwarf collected it, pleased, and bonded to it.

The next scene showed that dwarf leading a charge. A battle in the middle of a desert planet. Two armies—one of dwarves, one of men—mages in silver cloaks, showering vast, sky-splitting spells from gnarled iron staffs.

But the old dwarf gave a cry and made a hand gesture; the red moon blossomed out of him. Instantly, half the enemy's spells got voided—swallowed by the redness. Stomped out where they were. Like they were blotted out of existence. It looked easy.

Zane took special note of it. He felt the knowledge welling up in his mind, more and more, the more he saw…

Skill Evolved!
Shield of the Blood Moon [Common (E) -> Uncommon (E)]

Huh.

The dwarf's side charged through, and won.

The scene shifted. The dwarf was now even older, droopier, with coarse white hair that dragged on the ground. He stood atop a balcony in a grand old castle mired in sandy dunes. All around him—surrounding him—was an army of men. Warriors.

A clean-shaven, handsome general stepped forth, pointed, roared. His armies descended upon the castle…

They won through sheer brute might. The old dwarf could block their soul attacks—but not the points of their swords.

The general snatched up the Pagoda from the dwarf's fallen body.

The scene shifted. The general was now older—clad in shiny knight's armor scattered with shining white runes. He stood in the middle of some grand arena, an arena thronged with cheering spectators. He thrust his sword at his enemy. An aged wizard with glimmering eyes and a scheming smile.

The wizard wore a big pointy hat colored like the night sky, dotted with little pinprick white stars. He wielded a staff with a crystal ball at the end—and when he cast his Technique, its milky surface began to swirl…

The air warped. Illusions exploded through the air. Storm clouds sweeping in. Vast armies of the dead rising all over. Dark mists hazing the arena. The audience gasped, entranced. Lost.

But the general's eyes were trained firmly ahead—like he could see right through all those illusions. His pupils shone red, like two full blood moons.

Zane paid close attention to that too.

Skill evolved!
Shield of the Blood Moon [Uncommon (E) - > Rare (E)]

The general charged right through. And carved the wizard up. In the next scene, the crowd crowned him king.

One after one, the scenes came at Zane like waters in a fast-flowing river, almost blending into each other…

And each time he came away with a little more of the Skill in his mind.

The very next scene showed the king face-down on the ground, lost in a pool of his own blood. His body was a pincushion of arrows.

All around him streamed a cadre of elves, clad in woodland greens and browns—their insignias seemed familiar to Zane. It took a moment to recognize the World Tree Faction.

A woman descended, strutting forward—she seemed a half-elf. She was dressed in light airy silks, a beauty, fair, with eyes the dark-green of the forest. She was wearing some kind of tiara made of branches. She pursed her lips at the sight.

The elves rushed around her, bowing and scraping. Zane noticed flaming ruins in the background, still lingering with motes of green essence. They'd wrecked this place. Plants blossomed around their feet as they ran, seeding a new biome. Around this woman's feet in particular.

Something about her seemed familiar… Zane watched as she lifted a dainty hand and healed a gash on her forearm. There was a mending white light—and it came away perfect. That was exactly like Reina's Skill.

The elves around her were much more powerful than she was, he just realized. He could see it in their auras. They were so dense with essence and high-tier Law it spread out from them in little hazes, their little islands of power which they imposed on reality. Just by being there.

He didn't know what to call that, but this woman didn't have that—she was at least a stage below them. And they were bowing to her.

One of the elves retrieved a pagoda from the King's corpse. He knelt and presented it to her.

"Mistress Maker!" called the elf, bowing his head. She blinked at the thing, curious, and took it.

Zane blinked. Then frowned more. That was Reina's Title after all. He kept mulling it over as he saw her wielding the Pagoda, leading her elf-army against a nest of dragons, a coven of witches. Blocking fields of illusions, and sound-wave attacks, and paralyzing lightning bolts thrown by some massive storm deity…

He was thinking about how the men had called that general king. And how the elves were calling this woman with similar reverence. It looked the same. It was almost like 'Mistress Maker' was more than a title—like it was some kind of position.

Before he could think on it more, the scene changed again—and this time it was the Mistress lying, eyes closed, splayed out, unmoving. A spear through her belly. Her elf-guard were all shattered, broken, strewn about—burning.

Blue and red-clad warriors fell all over them. And Zane knew those insignias too. That was the Azure Flame Faction. A burly bald warrior strode forward, fists clenched, blazing red and black—just oozing gobs of magma. Some higher fusion. He ripped the spear out of her, then grabbed the treasure floating over her corpse.

"At last," he crowed. "The Pagoda!"

This scene Zane found most disturbing. That woman reminded him

too much of Reina.

He got the gist of it, though. Lots of fighting and killing—and examples of wielding the Blood Shield. Over and over. He saw a behemoth of a steel golem wrestling down the bold flame warrior, seizing the Pagoda from his mashed-up corpse. He saw a ninja in a cloak of living shadow with sickle knives whirling, blanketing the golem in so many corrosive hissing slashes it looked like a tornado. Rusting it, melting it, bringing it to its knees slash by slash… he saw an ice mage gunning down the ninja. With what looked like flintlock pistols, shooting… snowballs?

The Pagoda kept changing hands. Over and over—it didn't take long before—

Skill evolved!
Shield of the Blood Moon [Rare (E) -> Epic (E)]

It did come pretty easy. Zane barely needed to pay attention to the Skill this time. He was more interested in whatever was going on in the background, honestly. It seemed a semi-complete history of the Pagoda's ownership, a montage flashing on and on. Not a lot of it made much sense without context but there were some nuggets in there.

More and more examples went by. He waited patiently for it to finish. He saw empires rise and fall. A kingdom of steel and gears swallowing up a kingdom of dragon-riders. A little boy from a fishing village rising to become the hero of the land—soaking up the Ghost King's soul-strikes with Blood Moon blossoms. On and on. It just kept on going.

He had already hit something of a hard wall with this kind of transmission-vision learning, though. It was like the Spirit said. He had the theory, which is what this was. But it could only take you so far. Now he needed practice.

He wondered when this thing would end. He already had the Skill—he just wanted to try it out now. He guessed he had to sit through the rest. At least it was going faster now. Every ten minutes or so an interesting storyline would pop up, and he'd see a few important old powerful guys. But then they would fade to history like all the rest.

Maybe half an hour later, it finally ended. Zane was rather bored by then. And eager to get started.

***

Well then. Shall we play it again? said the Spirit.

"No," said Zane.

…Just one go? The Spirit seemed dubious. **Are you certain?**

"Yes."

You've hit Epic. Already.

"Yes."

By now it seemed to be slowly getting used to him. It stared just a bit this time.

Err. Right it said. **The Trial, then.**

"Let's do it," rumbled Zane.

I'll summon the dragon spirit first. We will see how you handle it.

"Okay."

It was much less pompous than with the young Emperor. No spiel about 'push your spirit to the limits' or whatever, which Zane was thankful for. It just fired the Trial up.

The mists swirled. The air began to tremble—and a ghost flickered to life. The head of a dragon, smoke trickling down its thick lips.

It was also much smaller than Zane remembered from that one vision. It materialized at about chest-height with him. Zane looked down on it. It looked up at him. It almost seemed a bit surprised to see him up there.

Fire, Xanath! instructed the Spirit.

The dragon took a second to get its bearings. But when it did, a smoke-storm gushed out of it.

Zane turned up his Shield.

He felt a tug on the Pagoda in his soul—and it trembled a little. Responding. Blood-red bloomed out of it—bloomed out of him. Expanding and expanding, blowing up to fit his Soul, until it was a shining crescent moon covering him wholly… Blanketing the dragon in a bloodred light.

The dragon almost seemed embarrassed to fire on him. When it did, it looked a little like spit flying off a windshield. It vanished.

The dragon blinked at him. He blinked at the dragon.

They both blinked at the Spirit.

…It appears said the Spirit faintly. **You have passed the First Trial.**

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209. Red Moon Pagoda (IV)

The Spirit considered him for a while. It looked pale, which was impressive for a ghost. Then—

That… should not have been that easy, it said.

Zane blinked at it.

That should have been a chance to temper your Shield, it choked. **To face adversity! To Level and Evolve your Skill! That…**

They stared at each other. They seemed to be doing that a lot. The Spirit stared at him puzzled.

"Hmm," said Zane.

Well, it said at last. **This won't do. You hardly gained a Level there, did you?**

"No."

…Then it appears you have broken the system.

Another silence. Zane wondered if he should say sorry or something.

Then—No. In Zane's opinion, one should never apologize for being too big. It would be another one of his wise sayings, he decided. He ought to write these down—he wasn't sure he could remember them all. Usually he just told Reina when they came to him, which was pretty much the same thing.

The Spirit had its hands on its hips now.

"Uh," said Zane. "What now?"

Hold on, it said. **I'm thinking.**

"Okay."

They stood there for a bit longer.

Alright, said the Spirit. **Here's what we'll do.**

It proposed they run the First Trial again, and again, and again. Rapid-fire. Until it actually tempered Zane—since that first go clearly barely did anything at all. "Sure," said Zane agreeably.

The theory was this should get his Shield adapted to taking some solid loads. That meant throwing heavy-duty soul attacks at him until he felt it. Only then could it stretch beyond its limits.

So the Spirit fired up the ghost-dragon-thing again and got it to start spewing as fast as it could. When it ran out, the Spirit just spun it up again. The shots splattered all over on Zane's Moon-shield. He kept holding on.

The dragon hacked out a few dozen more of those ghost-fireballs before he started feeling the heat. He closed his eyes, honed in on the sensation—on the way his Skill brought out the Pagoda within. Each time he drew on it, it only deepened his connection to it.

At the start he had to grasp pretty hard for it. But a dozen shots in —

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon I -> II

Then again, another dozen shots later—

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon II -> III

Thirty or forty shots in, he could reach for it pretty easy and it would come.

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon III -> IV

When that ghostly power hit him it got sucked straight into his Pagoda. Like it was making contact with a black hole—it struck the edge, and flared briefly, and just… vanished. Erased. There was no sign of damage to the treasure at all.

The Spirit had some theories as to why his version was so strong at the start. The treasure expanded to suit the wielder, it thought. So even though it was fairly low-Level, he could still use a pretty big chunk of it.

As the dragon-breaths stacked up—and the poor ghost-dragon-head started to wheeze and sputter—Zane's moon started getting more robust too. Filling in. It went from almost a dark moon to coloring in a thick edge—a sliver of a crescent.

Eventually…

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon VIII -> IX
Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon IX -> X

By then it had reached a full proud bulky half-moon. And it came as soon as Zane called, like a muscle flexing. The ghost-dragon could hardly do anything to it now. Even after expending everything it had, over and over.

Skill evolved!
Shield of the Red Moon [Epic] X -> Shield of the Red Moon [Legendary] III

The whole thing took most of an hour, maybe two. The dragon seemed a little apologetic by the end of it, like it was trying its best. Zane was just a little too big.

The Spirit gave the beast a sympathetic pat on the head and dismissed it.

That's the Skill evolved, then? said the Spirit.

Zane nodded.

Well, I'll be. It opened its mouth as if it wanted to say more, then closed it and shook its head. **You don't want to know how long that was supposed to take. Ready for the Second Trial?**

It didn't even stop to let Zane answer this time. It just gave a grunt. **Of course you are. Here we go. Second Trial: Field of Insanity!**

This one came subtly. A field of sprightly man-sized flowers bloomed around him, swollen with pollen and strange fungi that glowed radioactive colors. They started spraying him with all kinds of weird spores.

They didn't hit his Shield directly. They came softly—like they were trying to sneak past. It took a different kind of effort to resist. The first time he tried it, a few got through. He sneezed a bit, but that was the brunt of the damage.

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon III -> IV

And that was all.

He was pretty sure he would've been fine even without the Shield. It felt weird to him, but it wasn't too bad. It would've felt worse if he hadn't just Leveled his Shield a bunch, he knew. But as it was he could take it quite well.

That was the Second Trial, said the Spirit. **...Anything? No?**

Zane shrugged.

It threw up its hands.

Figures.

It gave a pause. **I'm supposed to give you time to recover, you understand. Consolidate your gains. Perhaps a few months to let your soul heal fully before you try again.**

"I'm ready," said Zane.

They resorted to spamming him again. Back-to-back-to-back.

Soon he got better at resisting the soft subtle things as well as the hard direct things. His connection grew so strong he could feel it and the corporeal bond inside of him, a brilliant bloody cord. And it bloomed strong every time he was under attack—almost subconsciously now. Flaring out, taking shots at the slightest notice. Swallowing them utterly.

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon VI -> VII
Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon VII -> VIII
Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon VIII -> IX

"You still don't need to rest? At all?" said the Pagoda Spirit. It was getting slightly incredulous again.

Zane shook his head. "I can keep going."

They kept going.

His moon shield just kept filling out, blanketing his soul in that form-fitting ironclad armor. Impenetrable. Until—

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon IX -> X
Skill evolved!
Shield of the Red Moon [Legendary] X -> Shield of the Red Moon [Mythic] III

Now it was a nice three-quarters moon. He felt strong. Good. Amped up.

Err, said the Spirit. **That's all there is, then. The second trial is the limit of Core. Now you should be able to stop a solid type from any Core cultivator—even the most extreme of specialists. Your Shield is already very robust.**

"Hm," said Zane. He felt like he'd barely gotten started. He said so to the Spirit.

It considered him for a long while. It had a strange look in its eyes. Like it was debating whether it should do something it wasn't supposed to.

Well, it hedged. **While you're here… I suppose…** It paused. Shook its head.

No—you should stop here. Come back when you've reached Nascent. For now, any more is overkill, truly. The Third Trial simply isn't meant for Core Cultivators.

Zane perked up. "What?"

The Third Trial should only be taken by those over Level 300. In the Nascent Soul stage, it clarified.

"No," said Zane. "Before that."

What? said the Spirit. **…If your Skill Levels more, it would be overkill?**

Zane nodded. "Give it to me. I will take this Third Trial."

You're serious.

"Yes."

It's not like the others, warned the Spirit. **It's in a different league altogether—you'll be taking a full-fledged Nascent Soul cultivator's soul attack!**

"Give it to me," said Zane. "I want it. I want to be overkill."

Something about the idea pleased his Spirit, deep down… and so far, nothing had even challenged him. He had this. He was very confident in his body—but in matters of the soul, he was even more confident.

The Spirit hesitated. Then—**Well… I suppose…**

It gave him another once-over. **Bah! Alright. You can take it. Even if your Shield falters, and you take the blow head-on…**

It puzzled it out like it was doing some back-of-the-napkin calculations, then nodded, satisfied. **You should survive. Yes—there's too much of you to go down… That is something I never thought I'd say.**

"I am big," Zane agreed.

The Third Trial, then, said the Spirit. **Dance of the Thunder Demon!**

And storm clouds puffed up the skies, growling hungrily. Howling winds swirled, lashed all around him. And the whole lair dimmed, blackened…

Be warned—Nascent Soul cultivators have taken in the breath of Heaven and Earth! They exist more harmoniously with the Universe, in both reality and the Astral Plane…

A spirit creature broke out of the dark masses. At first, Zane thought it was just another chunk of cloud—and it was, kind of. It was very buff. Each muscle was a puff of storm-clouds. It was a nebulous thing, letting off jet streams. Its eyes were crackling balls of lightning. Lightning crackled down the length of it—it opened its black maw, let out a screech. Pure howling wind.

Tornado and thunder raged down its gullet. Gestating some electric blast.

Zane watched it all expectantly.

There really was something different to it. It was not bigger than Zane. But it did glow with a different kind of brightness. Like it existed more solidly in the Astral Plane than Zane did. Its aura felt more solid here too. The Spirit was right—it did feel on a whole different level to those other two.

He braced his Shield.

It opened its mouth. Mouth lighting up a buzzing, blistering white. And blasted him.

A mad rush of lightning, spewing wildly. His world whited out. He took it right to the face.

He staggered a good two steps.

He felt it crackling all over his shield—it felt like it'd been walloped by a hammer. Most of it pulsed into the Pagoda, grounded there—but for a second there he'd been kind of jittery.

He was mostly just surprised. Twitching a little, blinking the light out of his eyes—not really hurt. Just wobbly.

He was pretty happy with how he took that. Even he was pleasantly surprised. That was a Nascent Soul-Level shot—and he just ate it.

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon III -> IV

It was already the highest-grade Skill he had. Earth - Mythic. After this it would be the next rank entirely.

Then he realized the demon wasn't done. Its mouth was still open; its gullet still seethed lightning. That was just the opening volley.

Uh-oh.

Then it hit him.

Slammed right into his shield. Crashed all over it… cracked it down the middle. He had to really fight, grit his teeth, just to keep it together—

Skill up!
Shield of the Red Moon IV -> V

The more it raged at him, the more it smacked at him, the more he felt his shield adapting. Getting stronger.

But not as fast as it was breaking. He was doing his best to keep it all together but it was starting to look like the surface of a dropped egg—blinding seams splitting down the length of it. The whole red disc started to tremble, his crimson armor cracking at every joint—

Then it all shattered.

The Pagoda didn't shatter—just his connection to it. And the last of

the lightning descended on him.

Smashed straight into him. Tore through his soul-body—and had its way with him there. He didn't have any of the protections of his mortal body. The only thing he had was that it had to spread quite far to cover him, so no one part of him got roasted too bad. But still—

For a second he stood there. Just shuddering. Grunting. Teeth clenched. He was mostly only upright because his soul was locked dead-tight. He was having trouble mustering a coherent thought.

And then, slowly, like an old tree toppling, he fell over.

He landed face first, which was not surprising. For a while he just lay there flat, whole body twitching and spasming, feeling everything spiking up in sharp stabbing pains…

He ended up a smoking flat heap.

He rolled over, groaning. He saw the old Spirit standing over him wide-eyed. It looked concerned.

Zane picked himself up, brushed himself off. He frowned at his hands.

"Ow," said Zane.

…Are you alright?

"Yeah."

He stretched a bit. Everything hurt. It got him pretty good—his head especially. It felt like a raw soul wound; it throbbed something awful.

But he was still thinking about his Shield, the moment it broke. Frowning.

He could still take more. He had been way too relaxed there. That was not his best effort. It was far more than the last two Trials, he felt—he got complacent.

Let's take a break—

"No," said Zane. He clenched his fists. His eyes grew bright. "That just caught me off guard."

But now it had woken him up. For the first time this whole Trial, he had a challenge.

For the first time, it gave him a real fight.

He smashed his fists together.

"Again."

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210. Red Moon Pagoda (V)

For a moment, the Spirit looked like it wanted to say more. Then it got a good look at his face, and thought better of it.

Alright it said**… I hope you realize what you're in for, kid.**

And it unleashed the Thunder Demon on him.

But this time Zane already felt stronger going in. And he was ready this time—he felt shocked awake, felt his heart pumping strong now, warmed up, tingling hot all over. A new vigor coursed through him. Rushed out in every ragged breath.

The Demon unhinged its maw. And out poured a blistering torrent.

Lightning crashed against Zane's Shield. Beams of flickering, arcing, spasming yellow ramming a defiant crescent moon.

But this time Zane clenched his teeth and dug in his feet. He held firm. Already he was putting up a better fight.

Skill up!
Shield of the Blood Moon V -> VI

His Moon Skill was three-quarters full now, and growing. It was so much stimulus—too much stimulus—and his shield responded in kind, growing to match it, rising to the challenge. He felt it slowly coming together, felt he could draw more and more from the Pagoda, the worse that lightning lashing got—wave after wave crashed down on him—

And then it began to overwhelm him again.

Nascent Soul was nothing to be messed with. It was like fighting an iron-age army with stone-age tools. His soul couldn't wield Skills the same way. He wasn't equipped to deal with this. He should never have been here. All he had to compensate was his size—and as his Shield began to shake, cracks rupturing all over it—as his whole body began to tremble with the effort—

It wouldn't be enough.

But Zane clung on. Even as his shield started falling apart before his eyes, splitting at the lines, rucking up chunk by chunk like shattering ice floes.

He let out a guttural roar. He willed his shield to hold. It flared brighter and brighter, a furious red—

Skill up!

Shield of the Blood Moon VI -> VII

But still it wasn't enough.

He felt the moment it shattered. His soul had been grasping at that weakening connection, making a death grip. Then it all slipped from him at once, and he was left clawing at nothing. Falling away.

And lightning blitzed him. Dragged him under.

This time, though—even as it wrecked him—he tried his best to wrestle back control of his soul-body. Even as it locked out his arms and legs, even as it sent him jittering and spasming—he clenched his jaw, planted his feet. And took it. He hated going down. It rankled his pride, and he was finding, more and more, he had quite a bit of it.

It left him smoking. There was a raw burning feeling in the middle of his head, like it bored out a chunk of his soul. He was hurt, wobbly, seeing hazy doubles… but he was on his feet.

He was getting better. He could feel it.

"Again," breathed Zane.

He was starting to smile. Just a little.

Oh good Heavens, breathed the spirit. But Zane just gave it a look. And it scrambled to obey.

The next time the Thunder Demon came at him, it poured on bolt after bolt. Rained a monsoon's worth right over his head. Sent forks of cracks rippling down his shield, all the way through. But it held.

Skill up!
Shield of the Blood Moon VII -> VIII

He grinned even more. It was a feral kind of joy.

The more he Leveled, though, the more he felt an unusual resistance. It wasn't just that the levels got harder, which was normal. It almost felt like the universe didn't wanna give this to him—like he shouldn't have this power—it was too early.

He was running up against some kind of wall.

If he wanted this… he sensed he would have to seize it.

"One more time," he croaked.

This time he took the shot head-on, baring all his teeth, throwing out the full force of his shield—now magnificent, so big it was nearly full, making a beautiful bloody splotch right in the middle of the world—

Skill up!
Shield of the Blood Moon VIII -> IX

It swamped the thunderclouds. It swallowed the lightning. It crushed everything. Until it was the only thing left, hung bright in a dusky sky—

Skill up!
Shield of the Blood Moon IX -> X
Skill evolved!
Shield of the Blood Moon [Earth — Mythic -> Sky — Common]

And behind Zane, shining full, complete—a perfect bloody disc.

Zane was pretty sure he had never seen a Sky-grade Skill before. At least in person.

The moment it evolved, that lightning lost all meaning. It was like tossing a stone down a well—and not even hearing it hit the bottom. It whited out. Instantly. The demon was left hacking—and then it, too, flickered out.

All that was left was Zane, and his Moon. Shining over all.

Good Heavens choked the Spirit. **You—you absolute—**

It was struggling to find words. **You actually did it… you passed the third Trial. That's a *Sky-grade Soul Skill*—at *Core*! Do you know what that means?!**

Zane blinked. Shook his head.

It gagged… **Of course you don't.**

Then it just stared at him. **Your soul defense—Good Heavens—let's just say you won't need to so much as think about it until at least Level 400. Likely beyond! This is just… this is absurd.**

It shook its head again. **Heaven help anyone who tests you.**

Zane liked the look of his new Moon. He liked the feel of it too.

But it was not maxed out. His new Sky Skill was nice. But it was also Level one.

He turned back to the Spirit. "Do you have any more of those Trials I can do?"

At first, it was as though it didn't hear him right. Then it just goggled at him.

Did you just— It spluttered. **You can't be serious.**

"I want more," said Zane. "I can take it."

He actually wasn't totally sure he could take it if he thought about it logically. He was pretty wobbly right now. But in his heart, he definitely felt like he could take it. He was feeling pretty pumped up.

There's more, technically—but only past the second floor! It added hastily. **And before you ask, that won't unlock until you hit at least Nascent. Get to Level 300 first. There's nothing here for you anymore, you—!**

It let out a tight breath, pinched the bridge of its nose…

Ridiculous.

"Hmm," said Zane. He was a little disappointed.

Then again. Maybe this was one of those chances to be smart. He could choose his battles. He would conquer this in time.

The Spirit muttered something under its breath. It kept shaking its head.

Then it noticed Zane still standing there, looking at it. **What? Go on—go! We're done here. Come back when you've hit Nascent. Then we'll talk. I don't expect to see you for at least a decade!**

That was how his little foray into the Red Moon Pagoda ended.

Zane knew it would not be nearly that long before he returned, though.

This soul stuff turned out to be pretty interesting. The stuff about 'killing enemies from a distance' was not super interesting to him. He preferred to wreck things head-on, face-to-face. He liked feeling his fists sink through flesh, crack bone, that kind of thing. He was old-fashioned that way. But making an impenetrable suit of soul-armor around himself, so he could wrecking-ball everything in his way, was even better... that did appeal to him.

There was a hidden sub-category of bird, Zane was realizing. Those tricksters who struck at you in weird ways, at the soul. Coming from a distance. They would do anything to avoid fighting him head-on. He had seen a fair few in those montages.

Usually they were sickly and spindly, with poor weak bodies. Old gnarly wizards and witches. Or weird spirits and ghosts. It would be very embarrassing for Zane if he ever got bested by one of those, he thought. Now they had nothing for him. Them, and anyone who wanted to come at him in the astral plane—his greatest strength now had a shield to match.

He shuffled off back home satisfied.

***

It turned out what felt like a few hours inside there was a solid week outside.

That Pagoda was the last big thing he had to check off his list of upgrades. His soul was pretty exhausted—it would take another few weeks to recover. Just in time for the Superdungeon.

Time flew by. Soon there was only one week until the deadline.

He and Reina spent a lot of that last week relaxing. Their lands stretched all over North America now. They went down to the transformed version of Yosemite, which Reina designated a protected 'national park' of sorts—the creatures there were special. They'd reverted to their ancient states, as dinosaurs. But with special powers. He and Reina found steel-Element Pterodactyls and wood-element

Brontosauruses. They took some long walks—she would geek out over them and tell him all kinds of interesting facts—their histories and habits, make observations of how the Change changed them, and he would amble along quietly listening. Sometimes he would just watch her face light up as she spoke about how to tell apart Stegosaurus eggs from boulders or something, and feel a simple contentment. A warmth in his chest. He could never get enough of how her mind worked.

Evan and Avery, meanwhile, both had good handles on their new Inheritances. But they, like Zane, had kind of run out of things to Level—they needed better treasures to get further. They got bored and started doing other things too.

That Superbara they got from South America was still around somehow, to Zane's consternation. He still was not sure what it did. Avery was trying to get it to do tricks—roll over, desperately waving a carrot in front of it. It was paying her zero attention—it was kind of just there. At first, she tried to harness it so she could ride it into battle, but then she realized it moved about one mile an hour.

Also, when she tried sitting on it, it dumped her squealing on her head. She declared it an enemy of the state.

Evan, though, had a much better relationship with it—he was constantly hugging it and baking it treats. He was also building a big doghouse—bara-house?—for it out of straw and scavenged leaves. Zane was pretty sure it had moved three feet that whole week, and two of those was to dump Avery off its back.

Anyway, it kept them busy.

***

Zane did have one last idea for something to upgrade. His Stormfire could still use another Concept. But he still wasn't fully recovered… and even if he wanted to push it, the Stormfire Tome said the next Concept was harder, and more complex, and would need more worldly resources—it called the Concepts he'd gotten so far, 'Plasma' and 'Chain Combustion', the 'Foundation Concepts.'

He could get away with using the pittance of Stormfire on Earth for that. But the little bit atop Searing Sky Peak in Italy wouldn't be nearly enough to get much further. It was hardly enough for Chain Combustion. He and Reina both felt it would be smarter to save it for the Superdungeon.

***

Meanwhile, around the world, the other eight Gates were opening. One by one. All of them transformed A or A+-ranked dungeons. There was at least one for every major continent. Two were directly on the North and South Poles.

That made nine chances in total for Earth. As long as just one party made it through, their planet would be integrated.

If not, it would be overrun by Monsters.

Each of the parties—the one led by Vanessa, or by Eze, or by Yuki—were all preparing very seriously. Each of them had the eyes of the world on them. But they all knew who this would all come down to.

There were crowds of reporters at the Luminous Faction now, though Reina made sure they were kept a fair ways away so they wouldn't disturb him. He would see them yammering and speculating as he made his way between the dojo and his mansion with Reina.

It was a relaxing time, but it was also a tense time. For everyone. Once more the fate of their world hung in the balance. If they failed here, Reina thought they would become just another one of those lost realms in that Graveyard, the Superdungeon.

Zane would not let that happen.

He knew what he was up against. It wasn't just people on Earth watching him. He felt the eyes of the broader Universe on him—the Minotaur had made that clear. Some powerful creatures wanted him dead. The moment he stepped foot in that dungeon, he would be going down a hard path.

But he had strengthened his body—his skin, his muscles, his tendons. Strengthened his soul to be practically unbreakable. Strengthened his Law, too, with Chain Combustion. And boosted his Level lots.

He was as ready as he could be.

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211. Big Board

Three days until the opening of the First Gate
Observatory
Azure Flame Faction

Scout Haelin took a drag of his pipe. He sat on a pale hunk of stone just outside the Observatory proper, thinking about what was to come.

Before him lay a barren moonscape. And beyond, the vast darkness of space. The Observatory lay on a moon in the far reaches of Azure Flame territory. There was no life here. No plants, not even the tiniest of micro-organisms. No auras except him and his assistants.

This was by design. Too many would mess with the finely tuned instruments squared away in the giant steel dome behind him.

The scenes here were bleak and monotonous, for the most part. The only things worth looking at lay above.

He saw them spread out against the sky. The Outer Faction Planets.

First an orb of jagged reds and blacks, a seething bubbling place where great hunks of blackened coal floated atop seas of lava drifts. It housed those disciples who chose the Path of Core Magma. It was also home to another trifling few billion—the descendants of servants of long-gone disciples, built up over Chaos Cycles' worth of time. They had grown to have their own tribes, kingdoms, empires… eons of history, of culture, forged in that merciless biome.

But they were mere ants to the true lords of that Planet: the Azure Flame Faction disciples, who were nearly revered as deities. They might as well have been compared to the common man.

A quarter of the way across the sky spun another planet. This one was covered in a bleak swirl of gray, flickering with intense yellows and reds, cascading over and over, spiraling toward a churning, frothing center. A supermassive firestorm raging across its surface. That place housed the Outer Faction disciples who took up the Path of the Inferno.

Then, another quarter away, a third massive planet. Mostly barren and blackened, though you could make out great cities striking out over its surface—the homes of certain disciples. The air shimmered and warped across its entire surface. A sign of the enormous temperatures there. It was for those who cultivated the Path of the Heatwave.

There were other smaller more fringe planets, for the various fringe

Paths. But those were the biggest, with the most popular Paths. Each was home to hundreds of Outer Faction disciples. Each the cream of the crop in their Integration.

Beyond that, distant now, mere dots, Haelin saw the Inner Faction Planets. So much essence and aura drifted off of them they looked like little stars. But they paled in comparison to the real thing—the celestial body around which the whole Faction orbited.

The Phoenix Star. The greatest font of Fire Law in this galactic cluster. It bathed everything in its signature light, made everything slightly red-shifted. All the planets felt its presence. It fed them an immense amount of essence. It spawned legendary treasures all over Azure Flame territory—hotspots of Law that were the envy of any Fire cultivator. Planets of ever-erupting supervolcanoes. Molten lands so rich with Fire Law True Dragons left their eggs there to incubate. Such treasures ran all over this galaxy.

Haelin watched those great heavenly bodies revolve in slow silence.

Haelin sighed. He was nowhere close to any of that—not anymore. And he was glad of it. He was too old, and he chose this life.

He was content in this little Observatory. Though sometimes he liked to sit out here, and ponder the skies, and feel a pang of melancholy.

He stood. Picked up his walking stick, took a deep drag of pipe, coughed, and shuffled his way back in.

The Observatory was an enormous Spirit Steel dome they'd purchased from the Steelheart Conclave. The building itself was an instrument—run over with so many giant glowing runic circles it looked like a site of demon summoning. It cost the Azure Flame Faction a small fortune in essence stones to power it daily.

The insides were even more chaotic. Scrying glasses matting every inch of wall, showing replays—all the essence recordings the scouts could scrape from what little they had access to pre-Superdungeon. Most of it was what weak signals they could draw from essence transmissions—snips of broadcasts coming from the planets themselves.

Lots of flashes of essence, some piddling Law, as their planet's elites—low Foundation fighters, mostly—dueled against Monster hordes. Lots of shouting. Lots of blood and explosions.

There were also a few recordings they got from the Auction, and that was all. It wasn't a lot to work off of, but it was all the scouts had, and they scrutinized every little detail. By now Haelin swore he could recount each one by heart. Just looking at them gave him a headache.

He would be glad when they all cleared up in three days' time—and they finally got access to some real data. The Superdungeon feeds.

One of his aides came up to him, scroll in hand. "I've made notes

on the latest batch of recordings, sir."

"Anything interesting?" said Haelin.

"Not especially, sir."

Haelin grunted.

He turned to the one chunk of wall clear of scrying glasses.

Just static pictures here. Hundreds of faces and names lined up one after another. Each with a number next to them: #1, #2, #3, and so on. Each with a 'max bid' assigned beneath. The actual offer they'd make to the candidate would be a mix of treasures. For simplicity's sake the Scouting team recorded its value in essence stones.

This was the Big Board. Every Faction had something like this. They would rank all the picks who showed affinities with their Laws—who started down the paths of their Faction.

At this stage things were still up in the air—all except for the first pick, that was.

Haelin walked up to the first picture. A baffled-looking human male. Their picture caught him in the middle of scratching his head.

#1. Zane Walker of Earth. Max bid: 10,000 peak Sky stones.

Behind him, #2, was Yulgar—a half-giant from Planet Thain, the other Ur-Planet in this Integration. Max bid: 1,300 peak Sky stones. And then Cain Hastings of Earth. On and on.

A circle of pipe smoke puffed over Zane's face, framing him. Haelin considered him with a frown.

Three days to go.

In all his years scouting—not once had he come across a man quite like Zane Walker. That was the consensus across every scouting department he got news of. The other superstar of this Integration was a dark-and-water-affinity catkin from Planet Thain, and he came a distant second.

If this young man turned out to be the real deal…

Haelin sighed.

Best not to get his hopes up. He knew how this ended all too often.

Just then, the front door burst open.

It was the other senior Scout, Scout Zhang. He practically flew over—nearly knocking over an aide as he came, arms flapping wildly.

"The funding package came in," he gasped. "It's been approved—one of the Great Elders insisted on it! If—*when*—Zane Walker makes it through the Superdungeon, we'll have a king's ransom to throw at him!"

"Hold on," said Haelin. "*All* of it?"

Zhang nodded. "Every stone."

Haelin stared at him. "Well. I'll be damned."

"Mount Thunderclast's been censured. They're out of the running," said Zhang. He was so eager Haelin thought his mustache might

wobble off his face. “Which means we’ve just got to outbid those bastards at the Conclave—we’re this close!”

“That’s a big ask,” grunted Haelin. “Those bastards are rich as hell. They’ve got all the precious metal under Heaven—and if he’s truly a millennium talent, as he seems…”

“How could he not be? You saw him, you have eyes!”

Zhang spread his arms all the way out as though to portray Zane. “And that footage from the Monster Knight fight… he’s the one. He’s got to be!”

“We’ll see,” said Haelin, noncommittal. “The Superdungeon will be the real test. How many would-be geniuses have we seen crushed in that slaughterhouse? And with how badly they’ll want to off him… the odds are well against him.”

“He’ll make it,” Zhang insisted.

“We’ll see,” said Haelin again, turning away. “I’m not getting my hopes up. Neither should you. Recipe for disappointment.”

Zhang said something about him being an old fart. Haelin ignored it.

Despite himself though, he would never admit it to Zhang, he felt a smidge of hope. It was impossible not to, thinking about what Zane could become. He clenched his fist. “May Fate smile upon you, Zane Walker,” he muttered under his breath.

A pause.

“Say,” he said, turning a side-eye on Zhang. “Which Elder pushed that funding through?”

Zane was some prospect. But 10,000 peak Sky stones would be among the biggest offers they’d ever made.

“Don’t know,” said Zhang, shrugging. “They stayed anonymous. But something about him caught their eye, clearly.”

“Hmm.”

***

Steelheart Conclave

Light-years away, scouts at the Steelheart Conclave were diligently at work too.

Their Observatory, much like the Azure Flame Faction’s, stood on a distant moon. Everything there was cast in monochrome—a consequence of the steely-gray light shining from their home star.

Naturally their Observatory was a good deal more advanced than the Azure Flame Faction’s. Their Artificing was the best in the galaxy, and they saved the most advanced runes for themselves. A chunky antenna reached out from the top of the dome, rising so high it seemed to scrape the surface of space. It boosted signals from dozens of light-years away.

Its insides were nothing like the Azure Flame Faction Observatory's. No haphazard spray of mirrors here. Each scrying glass was cut to the same length, side by side in a perfect grid. A small team of scouts observed each one, making careful notations and real-time updates recorded in a neat stack of scrolls.

Their big board lay behind them. The faces and figures changed almost hourly. The #1 draft pick had stayed the same this whole time, though. The one among billions to whom they had allocated nearly half their total budget. The picture was of a man ramming face first into a cliff.

They did not pick out these pictures. Their arrays took a random snapshot—it was simply that this man spent a disproportionate amount of time being whacked in the face.

In big block letters underneath—ZANE WALKER.

The scouts scribbled away diligently, quietly. The Observatory hummed along, a well-functioning machine.

Then came the explosion.

It sent scrolls flying. Made half the machines go screeching, the other half dissolve into fuzziness—the scouts all jerked up wide-eyed. The twenty-ton door burst open.

In walked an old man. Lean but big-boned. You could see by his proud bearing the warrior he'd once been. He still carried himself like a man twice his size. Thick white scars lanced down his body.

"Is it true?" he rasped. "Have you found him?"

It took a moment for the scouts to identify him. Which was natural. He had hardly left his home planet in the Inner Faction in centuries—they only knew him by the statues.

"Grand Elder, Barbarian Sage!" they cried. They dropped to deep bows, heads so low they nearly touched the ground. It was incredibly rare that a Grand Elder himself would deign to visit the Observatory. It'd been millennia since the last time this happened.

The Sage snorted. "No need for that. Stand, stand! Tell me—has someone truly taken up my Inheritance at last?"

The head Scout rose, still bowing. "Yes, Elder!"

"Who? Wait—don't tell me."

The Elder perused the wall.

A pause.

Then he jabbed a pointer finger right at Zane's face. "He's the one."

"Yes, Elder!" said the head Scout. "How did you know?"

"Good bones," said the Sage. "Strong bones! Strapping young lad, isn't he? You can tell he's a bull of a man just by looking at him! And of course—the Inheritor of the Titan Rhino would be nothing less than number one."

He nodded, satisfied. "I approve. How does sponsorship work this

cycle? I forget. It's been ages."

"We can offer the candidate any item under Sky as soon as they advance to the second floor."

"And what have you chosen for him?"

"A block of peak Earth-grade Imperial-Gold Ore—"

"To hell with that." His eyes lit up. "I've got just the thing."

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212. Grand Entrance

This process was playing out on other planets too.

The Thousand Seas tribe was another one of the Nine Great Factions. Most of its planets were, appropriately, dominated by seas, with little islands peppered here and there. Some of their planets were little more than big globes of water. Massive cities floated atop them, built over on massive rafts. Some sat on ships the size of continents. Moving cities that could lift off of one planet, sail across the vast expanse of space to another, and plunk down if need be.

That was how Outer Faction disciples joined the Inner Faction. They would sail their bases right over.

Even their Observatory was floating: a buoy sat on a blob of slowly spinning water.

Inside, lightly dressed scouts debated vigorously with one another.

Their Big Board—lots of inked papers nailed to a giant straw bulletin—sat before them.

#1 was a catkin Thain warrior, Rafira. He had startling purple eyes and two black cat-ears. He was wrapped mostly in mummy bandages. You could see bad burns around the little chunks of exposed temple.

#3 was a certain Avery Lively. She looked rather surprised, flailing wildly as she was being shucked off the back of the Superbara.

***

Deep Earth Hall

The Deep Earth Hall was the quietest of the Nine Great Factions' galaxies. Probably because most of the action happened underground—though they were not a very talkative folk regardless.

The planets looked like great hunks of rock floating around. Some as big as stars. The only things that broke the surface were antenna-like steel beams, or steam vents, or sinkhole-like entrances that fed into tunnels running deep and wide.

Their Observatory was mostly underground too. Their big board, chiseled into the wall, featured the same Catkin man at #1, the one with the purple eyes. This time his hands were spread out, five mummified fingers reaching like he was summoning something.

#2 was a certain Emeka Eze, reading a skill tome by candlelight, sat on an old leather seat in his study.

***

Cult of Eternal Winter

The Cult of Eternal Winter's home star was frozen over. It streamed out a blistering cold light. The planets were caked in snow and frost. Some were vast glaciers unto themselves. Others full of wintry forests and soft drizzling snow.

Their Observatory was a yurt perched on a small distant chunk of ice. On their Big Board, Vanessa Volkova was #1.

***

Temple of the World Tree

Unlike the other Factions, the Temple of the World Tree was not centered on a star. Instead it was built around their signature World Tree.

They had two stars in their system, stuffed with plenty of essence—but those stars orbited the World Tree too. The Tree was what gave them life, gave them Law. Its enormous roots went deep into the fabric of the Universe itself, vanishing into the void. Its trunk spanned continents.

A little cloud of activity—staircases and vine-bridges and airships—floated alongside it, running up the entirety of the trunk. Civilization. Billions called this place their home, made houses on the fringes of single leaves. Kingdoms controlled their own little strata. The higher and higher you went, the more powerful and prestigious they got.

Though the top, past the uppermost canopies and boughs, was reserved for the disciples of the World Tree faction. And at its very peak, the head of the World Tree Faction made his home.

High Priest Lan Arandor led morning prayers from his perch atop the Everlasting Temple. On the very highest bough of them all. There he led thousands of World Tree faction disciples—and hundreds of billions of followers across the galaxy—in prayer every morning.

It was their sacred duty to care for the World Tree. They gained great powers in return.

Lately though, the Faction had fallen on stressful times. Their fated leader—by dint of her Title—had been missing for some millennia. Now she was presumed dead. And until her reincarnation was found, her role in the interim would be assumed by the head of the most powerful house—that was the High Priest Lan Arandor. He began every morning service by lamenting how aggrieved he was at this state of affairs.

The World Tree Faction's Observatory was a treehouse that sat on a tiny planet of lush loamy soil. And their Big Board, among all, was unique. They had their picks all worked out—from Lysa Mawa, #1000, to Reina Torres, #3. But their #1 was left blank. A question mark.

It was reserved for the reincarnation of the Mistress Maker. The sacred maiden fated to lead their Faction in Chaos Cycles past, and in Chaos Cycles to come.

***

The Mistress Maker in question was not aware of any of this, of course. At the moment she was rather preoccupied. It was a good thing there was no surveillance before the Superdungeon—the Temple monks would have been quite horrified to see what their sacred maiden was up to.

It was their last chance to level before the dungeon—and though she and Zane had racked up quite a few, they were hard at work this last week.

Level up!
Essence Level 229 -> 230

With a satisfied sigh, she rested her head on Zane's chest. She looked up at him. "Ready?" she murmured. Zane nodded.

She smiled and closed her eyes. She was asleep in seconds.

Zane looked at her fondly. She was at the World Rank #5 too. The preparations had all been made. He stared at the ceiling, chest rising and falling slowly. Feeling deeply peaceful.

Tomorrow.

It was time.

***

Tomorrow, bright and early, they were off.

Zane, Reina, Evan, and Avery all met at the town square at the crack of dawn. They were all pretty eager to get going, but Evan was the most excited of them all, as usual. He was ambling around in happy little circles. He was going to go save the world. This was the purpose of Evan.

He was also quite nervous. But he didn't hyperventilate anymore. He'd gotten a lot better at managing that kind of stuff—Zane remembered the first time he saw Evan, he was curled up in a tree. Sometimes Evan still patted his pockets for his inhaler—before the change, Evan used to get bad asthma attacks when he got scared. It was an old habit. Now he wasn't even doing that anymore.

Something about being around Zane seemed to be rubbing off on him. Every time he started going under he looked to Zane, and got a model of what it looked like to be unbothered. It helped a lot. Zane wasn't normally up for this kind of thing—he did not consider himself a good role model. Certainly most people should not try what he did. That would end quite badly. But if Evan found it useful, then Zane was happy. He ruffled the boy's hair. Evan beamed.

Avery wasn't even that cranky even though she was woken up

early, which was highly unusual.

"Alright gang!" she cried. "Let's kick some Monster ass."

She hated bullies as much as Evan didn't like bad guys. Especially when they went after her friend. "Don't you worry big fella," she told Zane, patting him on the back. "I've got you!"

She cracked her knuckles. "Those Monsters better hope they don't come across me…" She scrunched up her face. She was doing her best to look like she meant business. It was rather hard when you were under five feet tall.

A big crowd had come to see them off. Luminous Faction guards had to fence off the whole square but they were spilling into every side street, yelling and cheering. Zane had been wished good luck a lot these in the past few days. He saw blimps with reporters with dark rings under their eyes, announcing just as excitedly.

They all exploded when they saw him and his friends coming through. Raining cheers and well wishes—Evan pressed close to Zane, clutching Zane's arm. There were lots of World Rankers there too at the very front. Even top World Rankers. He saw some familiar faces. He noticed Cain Hastings waving a handkerchief, eyes a little watery, blowing his nose.

Zane noticed, with a little surprise, that Eze had come to send him off too. He stood aloof from the crowd, arms crossed—he gave Zane a little nod. Zane nodded right back.

They went on through the portals. Going out to Base Camp. It was not so much a mountain range anymore—more a mess of terrain. Some flat, some desert. In the distance Zane saw great basins, water slowly gathering. It would be some months before they filled.

He had done all that, he realized.

Huh.

Heaven's Peak, though loomed large as ever in the distance. Smoking slightly at the top.

Not another half hour of trekking later they were there. The first gate of the Superdungeon.

The stone-runed staircase, thick as a highway lead deep into the bowels of the earth. A hellish red light gushed from deep within…

Strange auras wafted out of that entrance. Foreign auras. Auras of other worlds, Zane knew. Past a certain point they would be descending into the unknown—not on Earth anymore. Past a certain point there was no going back. And they would be in the Super dungeon proper.

Reina squeezed his hand, bit her lip. Zane looked around. Everyone was a little apprehensive.

"Let's do this," he said. He knew he had to be the one to lead the way and show a strong face. He went on ahead first, so it would be

easy for his friends to follow. They did.

Everyone seemed to feel a lot more confident when it was him leading the way.

***

This tunnel was not natural. It was too perfectly cut—the stone an enormous rectangle winding deeper and deeper… At some point the stone started to change. Normal earth stone got streaked with pulsing blue veins. And then that earth stone started changing to something else, too, chunk by chunk. Something colored deeper, a kind of obsidian streaked with gray. An alien texture.

A new aura issued from deep within the tunnels. Washing out like a wall of heat, flowing over them and beyond—he felt it in the pit of his stomach, a kind of denseness like nothing he'd ever felt, an essence humidity. Just the ambient essence here was like an A-rank treasure floating in the air. If a Foundation cultivator stayed here a few months, they could get up to Core probably.

The deeper they went, the hotter, the denser things got—the walls turned darker, craggier, opening up from that perfect rectangular mold. Becoming something natural. Natural to some other world. It smelled of rusted metals and sulfur and ash. Ash-drifts floated on the air—clumps of black drifting before them…

Crystals started studding the walls. Peeking out of cracks in stone here and there. Big fat translucent white crystals, crystals that gave off a good deal of wispy light, and a great deal of thick essence—Zane examined them.

Crystal of Gildrundar [Common (E)]

A Crystal of Gildrundar takes 10 millennia to grow, nourished by the essence-dense atmosphere of Gildrundar. It is worth 10 Earth-Common Grade Essence Stones.

Reina harvested them. She was surprised how such good treasures were just lying around here—each Crystal was akin to 100 of their Max-grade Essence Stones back on Earth.

The mini-map opened up, showing the winding tunnel ahead. It was the only thing in sight.

You have entered: Floor 62: Dwarven Kingdom of Gildrundar.
To advance, enter the staircase located in:
Section 3: Throne Room
You are in:
Section 1: Grand Entrance Hall

Reina, Evan and Avery all flinched a bit at the notification. It told them what they were all suspecting—no going back now. They were in. Zane frowned at it.

So far it didn't look like much of a hall to Zane.

There were no Bosses to kill here either. You just needed to go down.

He saw the tunnels opening up on the mini-map into some big cavern. That looked engineered again. A perfect rectangle. The stuff inside—blotches of terrain—were laid at regular intervals too.

Reina thought that must be whatever the true entrance to the realm was. They were still coming up to it. They were all a little tense so far—except for Zane, who was mostly just cautious. But once they got in there… they would all need to be on their a-game.

In the tunnel-bends before they got there though, Zane caught sight of a few big yellow clumps on the mini-map set deep into the walls. Only there was no paths to get there—it was like they hovered in the middle of the terrain.

Reina frowned at them too. "I wonder if they're buried," she murmured. "Like veins of ore."

But they had no tools to get them. And these walls, with those weird otherworldly dense rocks, looked pretty thick. They did look like they would succumb to a pretty good hammer, though.

Zane looked at his hands. Looked up at the walls. Looked back to Reina.

She instantly got his drift.

"Stand back," he said.

"Why?" squeaked Evan. "What's going—Ohhh!"

And they went a good fifty feet back. Zane frowned. "Farther."

Hundred.

This… should be good enough?

Zane pricked a finger at the wall.

He hardly made a dent in it. Got a few loose stones out, maybe.

This was quite surprising to him—even pricking a finger with some force back on Earth opened up some divots. But it seemed whatever reality this place lived in could handle a whole lot more.

He frowned. Hmm.

He balled his hands into a fist. And threw a cautious punch.

BOOM!

The wall cracked—just a little. Ruptures ran out where he struck. But that was all.

The tunnel did not look anywhere near caving in.

This stone… it was of a caliber you would never find on Earth. Even in the S-rank dungeons.

It would need a more forceful approach.

Zane blinked at his hand. Then at the tunnel.

He was starting to smile. Just a little.

Back on Earth he always had to be at least a little gentler. It was too easy to break things. It had been so long since he could let loose. And actually punch something. Hard. Give it all he had.

He wasn't even sure how much he had.

Now was a good time to find out.

"Go back a mile," he told his friends. Just in case.

Then, when he saw them scramble back far enough—

He took a deep breath. Clenched his fist, wound back. And burned his blood.

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213. Grand Entrance (II)

Zane smashed. And this time the tunnel shook.

Cracks rushed up the wall, spread partway up the ceiling, shaking loose big gouts of dust.

It was so simple. So nice. That feeling of his fist breaking stone, of all that dense matter shivering, then cracking, then giving way all at once…

He wound back again, and this time he put some Stormfire into it. Then unleashed.

It was like setting off several tons of TNT underground. *BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!*

Voids opened up on the mini-map. Massive chunks of rock got blasted to smithereens, rushing deeper and deeper, smashing open a crude route.

The whole cavern shook, started groaning ominously. Fountains of dust spewed out the crevices—

It all came tumbling down. Right on his head. A big fat slab dropped on his skull.

The slab shattered. His skull did not.

It did hurt though. He groaned. It was actually quite heavy, to his surprise. He was used to eating Earth-slabs to the head and barely feeling it.

He grabbed some chunks and tossed aside the debris, coughing a little. Raina rushed over to check, but he showed her he was fine. Just a little bonked. He felt good.

He saw the end of the dust-ridden tunnel. A promising glint—something shiny. He stepped closer. Whatever it was, it had stopped Stormfire in its tracks. He'd discovered the treasure on the mini-map.

Impure Mithril [Earth (E)]

Mithril is a treasure native to the realm of Gildrundar. Through mining it, selling it, and equipping their armies with its armors, the Dwarves Kingdom grew rich and powerful—to the point where the Nine Great Factions took notice.

Most of the Dwarven Kingdom's cities were built around deep deposits of Mithril. Impure Mithril is the lowest grade.

It was a good three or four chunks, each as big as his head. It had a silvery sheen but lighter. It glowed softly, mysteriously, in the dark.

But they blazed in the Astral Plane. It was like Zane had hit on

some essence geyser—the aura pouring out of this stuff… it took the breath away. Zane picked up a chunk. Surprisingly light. He blinked at it for a moment.

Then he stuffed it in his mouth.

He was not prepared for how dense it was—the lightness was a ruse. His eyes widened. It took some serious Stormfire smelting to get it all liquid, and then a lot of swallowing to get it down.

Then each bead dropped like a stone. Down his throat. Deep into his gut. He could track that scalding-hot trail all the way until it hit his stomach. And erupted.

He groaned.

"Are you alright?" gasped Reina, rushing up. He nodded, his face a little red. It took a little for the mithril to settle, to trickle through the rest of his body—down the muscles, the tendons, out to bone—but when it did his Bloodline seized on it instantly. And sank that goodness deep into his body.

Skill up!
Colossal Tendons I -> II
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles IV -> V
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles V -> VI

He blinked. That much from just a little chunk?

Maybe that was just the higher grade—Earth – E-rank.

There was more where that came from—he grabbed another and scarfed it down, then another, melted it, drank. One by one.

Skill up!
Colossal Tendons II -> III
Skill up!
Colossal. Tendons III -> IV
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles V -> VII
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VIII -> IX

They all sat around waiting for him to stop being red. He just kept shoveling in mithril. His body really did feel like some powerful machine then. Reina and Avery looked a little amused. Evan looked a little bemused. Eventually he finished, gave a little burp.

His aura felt denser somehow now. He felt… good. Strong. Tingly all over and in the places that just took in mithril.

"This place," said Zane. "Has good treasure." He licked his lips and nodded, pleased.

They kept going.

***

If the commotion woke up any Monsters—which Reina was a little nervous about—there was no sign of it. They kept plodding along. And soon the tunnel opened out. And they were in the floor proper.

They emerged at an Entrance Hall so big it had to be meant for giants. Or gods. Columns thick as towers sprouted high, arched for shadowed ceilings. The floor was a warm polished brown, studded with crystals here and there.

There were cracks everywhere—running through the floors, the columns… the whole place looked like it had been through a terrible earthquake. Most of it was sunken in shadow. The ceilings went so high you couldn't even see them, and huge chunks had caved in all the way. Debris, rubble, chunks of shattered column were strewn about—a few columns toppled on their sides. They made barriers so thick they could've been castle walls. They were ribbed with golden fluting.

It looked like they had been fighting here, but all the dust had settled a long time ago.

They saw all this in snippets. The only light came from torches—the few that were left on the columns. They offered little pools of flickering light, but most of the place was lost to darkness. Absolute darkness—great sea of it stretching between little islands of light…

Even the mini-map had trouble peering through it. It was so thick the mini-map treated it like a physical thing, like terrain, and it did feel like wading through something heavier than air.

Avery could use some sensing tricks to get a lay of the land around though. "No Monsters," she whispered. "I'll keep my eyes peeled though."

She made a face. "No jump-scares on my watch!"

Zane looked around too, did his own survey of the place. Some chunks of wall showed cracked friezes. Dwarf armies at war, fighting dragons, or hammering important-looking fancy swords. That kind of thing. It had clearly been a while but they still looked pristine, untouched—other than the marks of battle, that was. They looked like fine craftsmanship.

The only sound was the soft crackling of the torches.

Together they went on through. It was impossible to be quiet here—even the little crunches of their footsteps bounced all over the place, raced out ahead of them, echoing over and over. You could hear your breaths in your ears, reverberating miles and back. His friends were feeling quite small in the middle of all this vastness.

Zane went on, head high.

"Stay with me," he said. And they did—they kept close. Evan held his sword up as a glowstick, which lit a little warm sphere around

them. They ambled toward the torchlight.

They had to wade through the ruins—around jagged fallen columns, over mounds of cracked rubble, crushed steel. Their footsteps kept echoing. Zane kept his guard up as he went, frowning at every patch of dark. So far, so good.

They reached the first island of torchlight. It was a little like hopping between lily pads, Zane thought. They kept going.

The second torch was where they found their first few X's.

Marked out on the mini-map ahead, a little cluster. It must've been a party. Cautiously they approached, and Zane saw it must've been a group of knights. Their bodies were gone but they left suits of armor behind.

Emerald Shardplate [Earth – F]

It looked like a pretty strong treasure, Reina thought, probably snagged from one of the lower floors. And it was caved all the way in… by one fierce strike, she suspected, by the look of the blow.

He and Reina exchanged a glance.

Zane shrugged. He made his face unbothered. "I am stronger than that steel," he told her. And he moved on.

Now—he was not sure he was that much stronger. If he got hit by whatever caved in that steel… he would probably feel it pretty deep. But he was confident he could handle anything that came for them. Confident he could protect them, and that was what was important.

They kept maneuvering through the rubble. They rounded another bend—and came across their next few corpses. This one a duo. A broken staff with a long-faded crystal at the end. And an enormous armor set, again crushed in—alongside a big fat Earth-rank Spirit Steel shield. Which had been crushed like a soda can. It looked like it had belonged to a berserker.

Zane frowned at it.

Reina had said as they were coming here that they'd been dropped on Floor 62—that was much deeper than any starting floor she had come across. Deeper than even most Ur-Planet folk got dropped. But they had expected that. So she tried not to let it rattle her. The only trouble was none of them knew just how much harder it meant.

Zane didn't like all this darkness around him.

He kept looking behind him, frowning at it.

He just didn't want to be surrounded and having his friends get jumped from behind—he wasn't sure he could be everywhere at once.

It was simple being alone. He felt invincible then.

But when his friends were here… he sometimes felt an odd sense of vulnerability. They broke a lot easier than him—and he cared about their breaking a lot more than his own. It made him a little antsy.

Especially since he knew what was coming for him. Reina was convinced they would be throwing the kitchen sink at him.

He shook his head.

He, of all people, would not get in his own head. That was that. He knew if he did that they were all done. They were relying on him—it was especially important now to show who he was. He had to be strong.

He could do that.

So he just kept going.

***

It turned out to be the right call. There were tons of noises. Mostly from the shadows. Ghosts in the darkness. But nothing jumped them out of the dark. They got all the way up to the end of the Hall—to the grand entrance proper.

Up ahead lay ten islands of torchlight, all strung together. The entrance was two massive stone doors, so big they could've been made to admit crowds or armies—sealed off, laden with thick runes. Bold blocky inscriptions fringed them, written in some long-lost language.

A dozen giant statues—smiling faces, enormous teeth, apelike fists—sat, set into the walls all around. They were colored a little different from the rest of the place. Not stone. A kind of metal verging on black that looked incredibly dense.

As they came up to the entrance they saw a sea of X's. X's upon X's. All bunched together.

Everyone tensed up.

Zane clenched his fists. Narrowed his eyes.

Reina got in a battle stance, gave him a nod. Avery and Evan were up and ready too. They came in behind with him as the tip of the spear.

They stepped over crushed bones, which Zane had thought was just more rubble at first. Between them and the entrance lay a vast array of crushed plate and crushed helms and crushed greaves—lots of crushing here. Mostly S-grade and Earth-rank treasures, some smashed so bad you couldn't even tell what they were.

Reina commented, nibbling her lip, about how closely they were arranged, almost in little piles. Like parties that got surrounded, and crushed together, and went out in a tightening circle. She felt they had to be at least Core judging by their gear.

"Still don't see any Monsters," said Avery doubtfully. She had already checked the ceiling—and spread her senses as far as she could into the dark, trying to sniff out any tricksters trying to sneak attack them. Nothing. It was all exactly as it looked like.

"Maybe they all left already?" said Evan hopefully.

They all thought about that for a moment. Reina felt it was pretty

clear the only way forward was through that gate. They would have to keep vigilant, though. She narrowed her eyes at the darkness, then the door. Then those statues. She lingered there.

Slowly, they drew closer….

***

And sure enough. As soon as they stepped fully into the light—

A deep groaning echoed through the Grand Hall. It was like an earthquake deep underground—but nothing was moving.

The torches all flared doubly bright. Everywhere. And for a moment the Hall was half lit—

And then all the torches behind them, tracing their paths, blacked out.

The ones in front blazed to infernos.

"It's coming," said Reina, voice tight. "Get ready!"

Her eyes were squarely on those statues.

Their strange smiling tombstone-teeth faces… their eyes flared red.

And dormant runes all over their bodies flared to life. Bands of brilliant blue stark against vast chunks of black steel.

"Get back," grunted Zane, narrowing his eyes at them. He tried to keep them in his field of vision as they activated, one by one.

Those giant rune markings just kept ratcheting up—turning to higher gears. Blazing with monstrous life. Auras exploded out of them, choking the air… The only time Zane had felt something even close was with the Monster Knight.

Their dots finally popped up red on the mini-map.

Warden of Gildrundar (Monster)
Level 250
Warden of Gildrundar (Monster)
Level 250
Warden of Gildrundar (Monster)
Level 250

On and on…

Ten of them in total.

It wasn't just great treasures here. The Monsters were made to match.

They smashed their fists together, one by one, like they were clashing cymbals. And shockwaves roared out, so powerful, so violent they shattered stones where they lay. He felt it in his belly, but he was fine. He heard Evan, Avery and Reina gasp, and for a moment his heart sank—but they felt fine. Lightly hurt.

It still enraged him though.

White noise sparked in his ears.

Then their heads all swiveled to look at him. Their bodies didn't

turn, but it was like they locked onto him. Zane felt inside for their cores—cores churning essence like enormous batteries powering the beasts. And he felt tiny souls inside of them, Monstrous souls. Something between mechanical and living. Their strange dome heads locked in that weird ear-to-ear grin, teeth bared…

All those souls felt just one thing. Like they'd been programmed for just one purpose.

KILL ZANE WALKER.

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214. Grand Entrance (III)

KILL ZANE WALKER.

When Zane felt this, it came as a relief, weirdly.

He had been a little tense this whole time. When he saw the creatures start rounding on him, the first thing he started thinking about how he would handle them all at once. If eight of them went for him, but two went for Reina, Avery and Evan… his heart sank. He wasn't sure he could wade through all that.

But now he knew they were just coming for him. Just him.

He had to rely on himself to fight his way out of this.

This was familiar. Almost nice. He could breathe easy.

All he had to do was win a fight. He knew how to do that.

They started circling him, trapping him, closing in one by one. Drawing in a net. Fists so big each finger could've been a hammerhead, strong enough to pulp earth-grade treasures in one blow. Each step sank them a good foot into the dense ground—raised *CLANG-CLANG*!s as they came for him. They groaned and wheezed like old rusted things.

They weren't interested in a fair fight. They were coming to mob him.

Zane narrowed his eyes.

And he called forth his muscles. His tendons. His body.

It was time to give it everything—finally.

It had been so long since he had really let loose. He let out a deep breath, felt it drawing up his whole body… for some reason he began to smile. Just a little.

Titans of cold steel and red eyes swarmed a titan of flesh and hot blood.

Their fists started to whir, hum, smolder gray-black… an immense sense of density leaked off them. Earth and Steel twined in some unholy creation. Their faces with metals compressed under unfathomable pressure for ages, molded in intense heat at the center of the Earth. Brought to the surface they were monstrous. Out-of-this-world alien metals. Coming to crush him.

Zane put up his own fists.

Behind, Evan let out a battle cry and started firing off shots. Avery tried helping too. But something about these creatures made them almost immune—they didn't live like humans did. Evan's slicing

powers just pinged off the metal, scoring foot-long gashes—but that was all. It was a paper cut in the grand scheme. And Evan was peak core too… Evan let out a dismayed cry.

But it wasn't his fault, Zane saw. That kind of denseness would never respond to cuts.

The only power these creatures respected was the power of crushing. They wielded the crush as their greatest weapon. Only the crush could destroy them.

There were too many of them—so this time, no hammer. No axe. He would use something tried-and-true, both crushing and fast. Something violent, explosive. That needed no setup.

He summoned his Chains, whirled them around his fists, wrapping them tight, and set it all on Stormfire. And now he had his own two dense hammers at his side. His, though, were on fire.

By now the Wardens had closed such a tight circle around him they'd fenced off the light. It was just seconds before impact… Zane smashed his fists together, loosed Primal Roar—and felt his body jump into a higher gear. At the same time, a new affectionate warmth poured over him—it was Reina, buffing him as best she could, throwing up regeneration.

He let out a bellow. "*BRING IT*!"

They rushed them all at once. Shockingly fast for such heavy things. Stomping, groaning, giant hammer-arms swinging for his head…

And Zane got to work.

He flared everything inside him. Stormfire. Muscle. Tendons. Reacting, exploding in one enormous blast of energy. He felt every fiber of his body light up—tendons coiling, Bloodline raging, muscles firing on all cylinders, powers ratcheting higher and higher—swallowing up rivers of essence, burning it all as fuel, humming with tightly suppressed power.

Stormfire erupted down his body. And ignited him in flesh and soul. And in that moment his whole body, exerting to its new full limits, all at once, hit a stratum of power he had never known.

He stomped down, and Stormfire erupted at his heels. When he kicked off, his super-tendons and muscles fired in one glorious harmony. He only had eyes for the big Warden in front of him—its fat cylinder of a chest. It was raising that log of an arm, preparing to smash him—

But he blasted off. And beat it to the punch.

He sank his own Chain-wrapped fist a full foot into its chest. So hard you could see the shockwave rippling through the metal. See the plate caving in around it, bolts flying off the edges. See Stormfire exploding through its insides, blue-white raging against heavy black.

The explosion—the light, the heat, the sound blasting out all at once—blew out his eardrums.

Then the Warden reeled back, crashed heavily to the ground, a massive smoking crater in its chest; Stormfire combusting over and over inside of it, making it shiver with each blast, making silvery sludge leak out its insides… One red eye flickered in that cone head. Not dead. But horribly wounded.

At the same time, though… Zane let out a grunt.

That was just the hardest punch he'd ever thrown—but it was also the hardest material he'd ever tried to smash. The sheer denseness of it… the force coming back into his hand was monstrous too. His Chains had stopped much of it. But his fists still felt the backlash.

His bones weren't like the rest of his body. Strong. But not Titan Strong…

No time to think on it. The others were upon him. Four of them, closing in on all sides, throwing all at once—and instantly Zane knew he was not taking them all at once. He had to choose and deal with the consequences. So he roared his defiance, and just let loose.

Once you set Zane into motion, there was no stopping him. Once his muscles got going, started kicking into higher and higher gear, you had to put him out to stop him. Every second he was rising—every second his heart had to beat harder to keep up, his blood pumped faster, raged hotter—and he urged his body on as strong as he could. He felt his muscles bulging with more and more power—so much it was almost painful, so much it tore at his skin.

He turned and channeled it in a haymaker of a Stormfire Punch.

This time his fist blasted through the steel—and sank a full two feet deep into the torso-section, so deep he went up past the elbow. The golem's back exploded, sending molten steel splattering; so deep he felt his fist grazing the very heart of it, its energy core, making it go haywire even as Stormfire exploded over and over inside of it, making a wreckage of its body—

This time both the Warden's eyes went out. It died on the spot. Before it even hit the ground, its steely innards sloshing thick out of it. And Zane felt an intense flicker of satisfaction.

The problem was—agony flared in his fist a moment later. It had broken—not just a part, all of it. But there was no time left. He wrenched his fist out of the Warden's body, whirling as fast as he could, and decked the Monster behind him right up the chin, smashing in that ugly smile, smashing in its head, blasting so much force through its body it went spinning—hundreds of tons of dense metal whirling through the air, flipping head-over-heels—

His other fist shattered too. But he was pleased; he felt an intense flicker of satisfaction.

That was all he had time to get in.

Then two very painful things happened in quick succession.

An ultra-dense steel battering ram rammed into his spine at full speed. Right from behind. And he heard a huge, awful *CRACK!*

Then—just as he turned in a fury, feeling his legs giving out beneath him—the second Warden's haymaker, loaded with all the momentum, and power, and weight in the world, smashed straight into his chin.

There was a sickening *CRUNCH-CRUNCH*—the sounds of Zane's face—buried beneath a massive *CLANG!* And his head snapped all the way back, jaw shattering in his skull. Reams of teeth went flying. Blood erupted out of his mouth.

And then he was weightless, hurdling through the air, all hundreds of pounds of him—for a split-second all went black. It took a furious effort not to go out just then. It was a matter of pure stubbornness, clenching broken fists, gritting teeth he didn't even have left.

It took a hell of an effort. But he made it.

Somehow he landed on one knee. He didn't even realize it at first—for that first three seconds he was still furiously clawing himself back from the edge.

He was greeted by two notifications.

Warning!
Health under 75%
Warning!
Health under 50%
Savage Body Activated!
Vitality increased 25%
Strength increased 25%
Speed increased 25%

It all came through woozy eyes. He spat out another mouthful of bloody teeth. He felt quite light-headed.

…So he was right. He did feel it when they hit him.

He tried adjusting his jaw but it wouldn't listen to him. Too broken. He tried getting his bearings, frowning, trying to make sense of the smear of dark colors that was his vision. Everything felt rather distant, hazy. He couldn't quite get his balance.

It turned out to be a good thing he got battered there, he realized. He only took two hard shots—and it had blasted him to the edge. Now they were turning, circling back into him, turning, it gave him a few precious breaths to recover. If another one of those things had gotten its hands on him just then—clobbered him over the head…

Zane had a thick skull. But he was not sure it was that thick.

He took deep, billowing breaths. Savage Body helped—like a strong

shot of adrenaline. It kept him on his feet.

Then he became aware of something washing over the pain, something warm. He could feel teeth again through the blood in his mouth—could feel hot, almost ticklish feelings where his jaw got broken. Stitching together at shocking speed. His back, too, flared hot—his bones, his skin—it all came from a connection. Intense warm feelings, concern, gushing into him—Reina let out a cry.

At the same time, his Stormfire Renewal started exploding all over him. His mouth, his insides, his bones—

Skill up!
Stormfire Renewal II -> III

And his Titanic recovery flared up too.

His Health started shooting back up. So fast it astonished him. Almost 10% a second. Zane's new super-Core powering his healing—but it worked very well with Reina's incredible healing power upgrades. Which was making all the difference. It took an enormous amount of power to mend something as high-quality as his body now. But he knew Reina was putting in the work whenever she could. Preparing for just this kind of moment.

By the time the whirring death circle closed in on him again—by the time it was time to fight—his head had cleared.

Through it all, Zane felt a little warmth in his chest at the thought of Reina, watching him, probably biting her lip with worry, working hard somewhere back there—he also felt a new spurt of intensity. It was a sharp reminder why he could not allow himself to go down.

He took another deep breath. Head bowed.

Then he lifted it. And faced his enemy again. Eyes bright.

In the meantime… in the background, masked for a second by all that pain, biding its time… his body had never shut off. His muscles, his Bloodline, had still been running white-hot.

Zane had never let himself go out.

Even as he was broken, he could feel himself starting to overheat, weirdly—some parts of him, the bones, still felt tender; others blazed. When he panted, he breathed out huge clouds of steaming essence—the way a freight train lets out huge gobs of smoke as it approaches maximum speed…

His whole body was starting to shiver. There was just too much raw power inside of him—even as eight Wardens circled him again. Intent on the kill.

But after those exchanges—after feeling the healing—there was a new hardness to his eyes. He saw the shape of the battle now. He saw how he would force the win. They should never have let him get going like this. His muscles were so pumped now he could feel his

skin stretching tight just to contain himself.

They should have put him down when they had the chance.

He snorted a cloud of steam. Let out a roar.

And exploded at them.

This time he didn't care what happened to his body. He only cared about destruction.

He threw one punch—and folded a Level 250 goliath of a Monster like tinfoil. But he didn't linger. Already he had the rest in his mind, feeling their crude minds closing in, feeling the paths of their strikes as he whirled around, and fed another Warden his knuckles. So deep his fist went out the other side of it.

A third punch blasted out the core of another—and by now he knew both his fists were badly broken. But only then did the pain catch up to him, flaring white-hot in his hands. But not hotter than the rest of his body; he was running so hot everywhere he could hardly even feel it. The pain was a little thing, easily brushed off.

A fourth punch through broken hands and he felt his forearms shattering. Couldn't even hear the cracks; his heart was pounding too loud in his head. He also saw the fat smiling head of a Warden blast off like a flying saucer, punched so hard that ugly smile got turned to a gaping frown…

Pairs of eyes went dim, one after another. In rapid succession.

Warning!
Health under 75%

His Health was shooting down fast. They hadn't even hit him yet. This was just what he did to himself. Bones rupturing. Organs rupturing. But he had so much power, so much he could hardly stand it, and he was expressing it in a beautiful, violent rapture—he would take them all down. They could not contain him, did not have a hope of stopping him. He did not even know how many he had broken; he just knew the job wasn't done.

He was winding back for a fifth blow when they caught him.

One. Two. Three. Four times. All at once. Once to the back. Once to the belly. Twice to the skull.

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

And Zane went down.

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215. Grand Entrance (IV)

Everyone knew Zane Walker could take a hell of a punch. Reporters had been saying so since his fight with Eze—you had to kill him. And even then, he wouldn't stay down.

Still—Reina couldn't help but let out a gasp when he got hit. Four times, one after another.

Two sledgehammers clocked him in the face—each with enough force to annihilate any living creature on Earth.

A third caved in his belly. A fourth, his back. The sounds—those brutal crunches—were sickening.

And he went flying.

He didn't even have it in him to break his fall. He just flopped like a big ragdoll to the ground, face-down—and for a moment Reina's heart stopped even as she desperately poured in her healing.

The Monsters began turning. Saw his prone body, and their smiles seemed to widen in the hellish light—

A heartbeat. And they started stomping closer. Two… Three… it all passed with agonizing slowness.

She saw a pool of his own blood leaking out of him, drowning him slowly…

He had to get up—and fast. But there was just no sign of it.

Her heart sank.

Just when Reina was getting ready to throw herself between them, she heard a groan.

A shattered forearm planted on the ground. And that bloodied, battered head began to lift.

It was crushed. Broken in so many places—but the eyes were the same.

They had knocked everything out of him. But not that.

His fighting spirit flared bright as ever.

Skull. Cracked. Jaw. Broken. But slowly it was stitching together… Reina gave a cry, redoubled her healing efforts. And his shambling body started piecing itself back together, Stormfire raging at the wounds, even as he stood, swaying on his feet…

Relief washed over her.

She knew he would. She always knew. And yet… it still tore at her heart every time.

She knew he had the will, and she knew he liked to lean on it in battle. But it wasn't just a matter of will. As the Monsters he threw

himself at got stronger and stronger, she always worried he would hit the point where his body just couldn't keep up… but then—he had this way of pushing his body to do things it could never otherwise do, if he knew he had to…

Like he was doing this very instant.

The air around Zane was starting to shiver now, trembling—and Zane's body began to leak essence. She gasped. His Core; it had never stopped spinning. And now it was going so incredibly fast—

He bellowed through bloody teeth.

***

Zane had felt his face splatter against the stone.

And he was broken. Everywhere. Especially his head—it was a spiderweb of blinding pain. He couldn't feel his mouth, just a fuzzy sphere of white-hot pain. It had gotten inside him. It was everywhere, piercing bright. Everywhere he tried to think, he could only find pain. It was some of the worst he'd felt in his life. He couldn't seem to remember very much else…

He had a vague idea he had to do something. He just… couldn't seem to remember what.

Warning!
Critical Health
Savage Body Activated!
Strength increased 50%
Speed increased 50%
Vitality increased 50%

A jolt of sudden energy, sudden power, blowing up his body. And he remembered.

He had to get up. Now. Fast.

Must. Get up. *NOW*.

He did. Groaning, slobbering a little, eyes burning, that one commanding burst of will animating his shattered body—

And all the while he felt warmth flowing into him, warmth exploding inside him, mending, patching the holes in his head, his chest, his arms—

He coughed blood. He dragged in some heavy breaths.

Then he felt like he could think again. He winced. Blinked.

…He'd made it up.

He looked around. He saw just four of those big steel golems coming at him. Just four of them. The rest—burning wreckages.

It worked.

It had been a bit risky—and he'd let himself go a little too much near the end there—but he'd gotten it done.

He let out a long, slow, rattling breath. And narrowed his eyes.

They had their chance. They would not have another.

This time the Monsters stood there—not even enough to swamp him anymore. They looked a little stunned. Like he was not supposed to be standing right now—it didn't compute to them.

He certainly was not supposed to be burning up as bad as he was.

Even standing there—lightheaded, woozy—his body was running so hot now he felt he might burn alive. He was overheating, leaking at the very seams, brilliant Stormfire-blue leaking out the cracks in his skin…

His muscles felt stretched so painful-tight they might explode.

Even with all the essence in his Core, he felt his reserves dropping off a cliff.

No more wild flurries. It was time for something heavy-duty.

It was time to finish things.

He summoned a new chain-head. A breath. Two. Three.

Just as they converged on him his Meteor Hammers came to hand.

He chucked them up in the air, and let them take the bulk of his burning powers.

They blazed so hot in that moment they chased away the solid dark. The heat alone melted it totally—drawing back those pitch-black curtains—and for a moment the whole of the grand hall, the mosaics, intricate carvings, fallen pillars, were cast in a mold of shocking blue-white.

Zane let out one last hoarse battle-cry.

Summoned all the powers of his body. His Law. His essence. And gave those hammers his all.

BOOM-BOOM!

The impact rattled the whole floor, sent stone jumping and rippling for miles, sent ruptures cracking over the ceiling—and made two smoking craters where Wardens had been. The last two wardens went sprawling just by the sheer force of the vibrations.

Zane's hammers swerved back around one last time. And finished the job. *BOOM-BOOM!*

The shaking soon stopped.

As Zane stood there heaving, he only heard burning. Crackling. Otherwise… quiet. It was a good thing too—he had finally been finished off. His muscles were sagging. His whole body was sagging.

Even his massive Core had run out.

He looked back one last time, just to make sure his friends were okay. They looked stunned—but not hurt.

He felt one last flicker of relief. And blacked out.

***

Azure Flame Faction Observatory

They thought Zane died three times over. First when they saw just which floor they dropped him on—then, when they saw the Level of the ten Monsters coming to crush him. And then, at last, when they landed their four blows—and sent him face-planting.

And now—finally—there was only silence in the room.

Scout Haelin's pipe slipped slowly from his slack jaw.

Then—

"Heavens…" Someone whispered.

Then, all at once—

"How did he—how did he *take* all that?!"

"How did he get back up?!"

And most pertinently—

"How the Hell does Zane Walker have so much essence?!"

The room erupted.

***

Steelheart Conclave Observatory

A similar silence.

But it was soon broken by booming laughter.

"I *told* you he was the one!" roared the Barbarian Sage. He downed a giant glass of spirits. "Yes, yes, yes!"

"Grand Elder—you cursed him for an idiot," said the Head Scout. "As soon as you saw him rush in."

In any other Faction it would have been unthinkable to contradict him like this, but the Steelheart Conclave were a blunt folk who had always prized blunt truths. Even to their superiors.

"Bah," said the Sage. He waved a hand blithely. "He knew he could survive that. He had it all figured out! And whether it was bravery or idiocy… that depends on if you live or die, does it not?"

"I… don't believe that makes sense, Grand Elder."

The Sage wrinkled his nose. "Don't bring your 'logic' into this," he said. "Let me celebrate, damnit! My boy lives!"

He clinked his glass. "Another!"

***

Zane woke up to three Level-ups. Which was a pleasant sight.

Level up!
Essence Level 230 -> 231
Level up!
Essence Level 231 -> 232
Level up!
Essence Level 232 -> 233

And also Reina's face. Also quite pleasant. But it was frowning… less pleasant. Oh. Not anymore. She saw he woke up. It was back to

pleasant.

It took her two hours to nurse him back to health. Mostly relieving the load he had put on his soul—which might've had him out for days otherwise. His head still had a dull ache to it, but his body felt solid by then. Evan and Avery were scared, then worried, then perfectly alright when they saw him upright and blinking.

He supposed he had taken quite a beating. Even for him.

He noticed the torches were blazing all around now, covering most of the hall in a cozy warm glow. The darkness was gone. That oppressive atmosphere was gone.

"That was… close," said Reina. She looked worried.

Zane tried to tell her he did have a plan. Well—at least an idea. It had come to him mid-fight, right about when his head had stopped spinning from being punched the first time.

After the first exchange, he saw how much damage he could do to them. He also saw how much damage they could do to him. Then it seemed simple what he should do.

When they hurt him, with his own healing, plus Reina's, he could recover pretty darn quickly from it.

But when he hit them, they stayed down.

So the way to victory felt simple to him. He didn't mind sacrificing himself up if it meant wrecking them, he explained.

As long as they didn't put him down for good he would win in the end.

Still…they did come pretty darn close, though. Too close. He frowned. They got him a little below 10%. He should not have gotten put down like that.

He'd gotten the job done, in the end.

Sometimes Zane did feel bad stressing her out. Still, that one, he was pretty sure, he couldn't have come up with much better—at least on the spot. Even if it was more reckless than he would like.

After she heard him out, Reina felt okay with the idea, in theory—she thought in group fights it was a good idea to take out as many as you could as fast as possible. Even if she didn't like what happened to him. It was just…

"We haven't even gotten through the front gates," she said softly. "If it's this bad now…"

Really she was worried about what was waiting for them.

…They really wanted to kill him.

"I will find a way," Zane promised her gently. No matter what. He swore it to himself.

She hesitated—then firmed her lips, nodded. "We'll just have to make you grow just as fast as the challenges they send you," she declared. "Or faster."

He nodded his agreement. Stood. “I feel good now,” he told her. “We can go.”

“Just one more thing,” Reina told him. And she gestured behind him.

Oh. Right.

There were shields. Crushed armor. Littered all over the place. And they were all Earth-ranked too. He had been in an intense fight mode that whole time. He hadn’t even thought about eating them… But it was a pretty damned big hall, now that the light caught it in full. There were tons more scattered throughout.

He still couldn’t get Bone Tempering yet. But this could be huge for his muscles, and tendons—if he could crush his enemies even faster it wouldn’t matter.

And he’d seen how his muscles and skin could absorb force too. The stronger they were, the more they could take the brunt of the shock.

Bone Tempering would be a lot better for bone defense. But this would help a good deal with that too.

Then he saw a little mountain of steel treasure piled off to the left.

“I made it for you,” said Evan happily.

Zane blinked at it.

“Hey,” said Avery. “I made one too!”

She did a ‘tada’. Hers was about ten feet to the left of Evan’s. It was also about five times smaller.

“…Steel is heavy, okay?” she said sheepishly. “Anyway—you wouldn't believe how big this place is! It must go like ten miles each way.”

Apparently they spent the last two hours while he was unconscious scampering around picking up all the best scraps of steel for him.

“Huh,” said Zane. He felt warm in his chest. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“…Thanks.”

“Mhm!” said Evan.

“…”

Zane went over and started munching.

***

Skill up!
Colossal Tendons IV -> V
Skill up!
Colossal Tendons V -> VI
Skill up!
Colossal Tendons VI -> VII

Skill up!

Behemoth Muscles VI -> VII
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles VII -> VIII
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles VIII -> IX

Skill up!
Indomitable Hide IX -> XI
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide X -> XI
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide XI -> XII

It was an excellent feast.

By the end of it, his skin had gotten a lot more resilient. His muscles felt all pumped, and he could feel they would fire about the same amount faster. His tendons got a similar boost.

It was a pretty darn significant power-up, taken together. He could take a lot more force. He could dish a lot more too.

Put him up against those Wardens again, and he might break a few bones. But they would not have him on the ropes again. That he was sure of.

He thought about what Reina said.

He had to get stronger. Faster. They were all counting on him to do that. His world was, even. He clenched his fist.

Together, they went through the gate.

***

Meanwhile—on the Temple of the World Tree…

"…Say that again," croaked High Priest Lan Arandor, one eye twitching. "Slowly."

The scout swallowed. "Your Holiness," he said, breathless. "The Mistress Maker has been reborn!"

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216. Stronghold Siege (I)

A silence. It stretched on and on. The Scout kept watching the High Priest's expression, but it betrayed nothing. Like staring at a cliff face.

"…Your holiness?" said the Scout nervously.

"How many know about this?" said Lan Arandor sharply.

At this point, the Scout had the sinking feeling he might be in some trouble.

"Just the Scouting department…" he blurted.

Lan's gaze sharpened. He went quiet again, thinking.

Another interminable silence. Then—

"The whole department?" said Lan.

"Yes."

A third silence. And this one was the most awful of them all. This time there was a little crack in the High Priest's mask of an expression. Just a few little twitches—but through that crack the Scout felt he got a glimpse of the High Priest's inner thoughts. It leaked out of him, a dark thundercloud of an aura, the emotions of his vast soul bleeding into the world…

He was brooding. Weighing things. And the Scout got the feeling one of them was his life.

This time the Scout didn't dare interrupt. He just stood there sweating.

At last, Lan turned to his head Inquisitor—standing in a corner of the twisted grove. Taele. A slender man clad in elegant pure-white robes. He had features sharp as knives, and his silver eyes shone like full moons—no pupils. He had a constant blank gaze, slightly unfocused. Like when you looked at him, he wasn't really seeing you but seeing past you, somewhere deeper, under the skin…

"Inquisitor! Round up every last Scout," snapped Lan. "Sign them all to Soul Contracts. I want them sworn to silence. Go. Now!"

Taele gave a bow. There was a strong gust of silvery wind—and when it passed, he was gone. Blown away, like just another leaf.

One final silence, and this time the Scout couldn't bear it anymore. "…Sir?" he said.

Lan's striking green eyes focused on him, blinked—only then did he remember the Scout was there at all.

"You have stumbled upon a very delicate situation," said the High Priest slowly, carefully. "This… new Mistress. I presume—an Earth Native?"

The Scout nodded.

Another nod.

"A youngling, then. Yes. This may yet be salvaged."

Lan closed his eyes. The lines on his face started to soften, slowly. The Scout felt like he might breathe again.

Before Lan Arandor, the Mistress Maker had taught that the Earth Mother was a gentle, kind deity, a sower of seeds—but Lan had long been the Head of the Inquisition, and he took a different tone. His lectures tended toward the strong, mighty, unyielding aspects of the doctrine. The World Tree was the organism which held up the Universe. One where every root and leaf faithfully served the whole. It had to shed all its rotting limbs, if it was to serve its purpose...

At last, Lan spoke.

"Have you got anything else to report?"

"Ah!" The Scout scrambled to track back his thoughts. "Err—right!"

He did have one last piece of information to share. Once he remembered it, he paled.

"Say it," commanded Lan.

And it was like the Scout's tongue moved without his permission. "She was in a party—a party headed by the consensus #1 Pick—Zane Walker!"

And Lan went still again.

"That one," Lan breathed. "Yes. I remember. He follows the paths of the Azure Flame Faction, does he not?"

The Scout jerked a nod, trembling.

"And—and they seemed quite intimate, your Holiness."

Lan's face was marred by one black line. Then another.

For a moment, the Scout was certain that this was it for him. Then —

"I see," said Lan softly. "And what Floor where they sighted on?"

"…Sixty-two, your Holiness…"

Lan let out a breath. "You may leave."

Feeling very lucky, the Scout did.

***

Soon Inquisitor Taele returned. Blown in on a cold autumn wind.

"It is done," said the elf.

"Good," said Lan. "This could be catastrophic… unless we make use of it. This new Maker can hardly be a few decades old. Inexperienced, naive in the ways of the world. If she survives Integration, controlling her should not be a problem. What *is* a problem, and a serious one… is Zane Walker."

Taele gave a slow, careful nod.

"He will have to be dealt with."

"…Understood." Taele turned. Paused. An eager glint filled his

blank eyes. “…And the Scouts. Shall I silence them. Permanently.”

“Control your bloodlust, Inquisitor,” said Lan sharply. “A single scout is one thing. Would you have me vanish an entire Order? A tight Soul Contract accomplishes the same without raising needless questions.”

“It would be more secure.”

“It would be sloppy. When the body falls they must not see the hand that holds the knife!”

Taele stared at him silently. Lan held his gaze.

The Inquisitor left.

Lan brooded alone in the dark.

The likelihood was, this new Mistress would die in that dungeon, and that would be the end of things. If she didn’t, though… he was already imagining the ways he could control her.

Just as he had the old Mistress. The Mistress Maker Title tended to choose gentle, kind, meek souls. Souls easily bent by strong wills.

Lan expected this new one would prove no different.

***

Floor 62
Graveyard of Forgotten Realms

Zane felt ready to go. Just a little woozy—mostly recovered essence-wise. He was still up for a good fight. But Reina insisted he recover all the way, and she looked kind of scary when she glowered and crossed her arms at him. So he sat down and did as told.

Evan and Avery felt a little bad they couldn't do much back there. Zane told them not to sweat it. They got ambushed—and also those things were just weird. Non-living, super-dense. They were hard to resist them. Besides, he was comfortable taking the load.

Reina did feel though, if they wanted the best chance against these Monsters, they would be best served working together—she felt they could have supported Zane a lot better if they had time to really strategize. Zane nodded.

***

A few hours later…

You've entered: Section 2-1: The Grand Plaza.

The mini-map just went on and on, tracking a seemingly endless grid, stuffed full. Zane remembered this was once its own world.

A little compass popped up at the very edge of the map.

The System Compass will guide you toward the next staircase.

They passed through the stone archways—which opened up into the city.

The dwarves did nothing small. Big fat buildings rose up to either side of them, each a massive hunk of a sculpture chiseled out of plateaus of stratified stone. They came in the same style—chunky, like very elaborate bank vaults. Lots of bolts, steel girders stacking seamlessly into the stone.

It might have been magnificent once. But the whole city had been broken to bits. Black and burnt, broken, incongruous, shattered—you could hardly find a building intact. Most of the high rises were cratered or decapitated, the domes split in uneven halves. But in the chunks that survived, you could see the craftsmanship. The fine edges.

Even after all these years, there were still precise sharp lines; there was no erosion to them. Lots of little details running all over the sides of buildings, tons of perfect geometries, honed to the very millimeter.

Some still bore old runes, glowing weakly, struggling to hang on. Whatever magic had been here was long gone. You could only see its echo.

There were pillars lining the Main Street, mostly toppled statues missing heads or arms. They walked under the shadow of a huge one —some sixty or seventy feet tall—a dwarf, an ancient statue with blank eyes and no mouth. It looked like it was screaming into the void.

And that was just the stuff they could see. There were still torches here, still blazing, especially close to the main road—the road they were on, a path beaten to perfect smoothness. Not counting the old craters. It was wide enough to be a highway.

The mini-map compass pointed toward a pretty simple path. Straight down the road. The farther you strayed though, the more the city was lost to shadows.

Shadows that seemed to flicker.

Zane saw a few little blips on the mini-map—tiny flashes of red… they vanished. He frowned at them.

“There’s definitely stuff there,” said Avery, squinting into the vast wall of darkness, barely held at bay by streetside torches. “… Oh boy.”

After their first Monster encounter, Zane knew he had to be a little careful. There were things in here that could hurt him—and bad.

It had been a while since he felt this kind of threat. He kept keen. And again he put himself out front—trying to be as big a shield as he could. Hopefully just by putting his body there, by being first, anything that came for them would come for him first too. That was his hope, at least.

They kept trudging through the broken city… kept seeing little red flickers in the distance, vanishing fast…

And Zane’s plan worked.

The first Monster that struck did get him first.

When it hit him, he didn't even feel it.

Mostly because it didn't really hurt him.

First, he heard Avery cry out—then there was a screech of rushing air, then a screech of sharpness on steel—and sparks showered.

Zane looked down.

Something was trying to stab his abs. It was a dark shape. No eyes, a living shadow with shadowy wispy hands way bigger than its body suggested—honed to fine jagged points, points smoking dark and poisonous Laws.

Shadow Stalker (Monster)
Essence Level 244

It kept stabbing and shrieking at him. But his abs were proving quite impenetrable.

Frowning, Zane made to grab it—and it just blipped out of sight.

Hm.

Zane surveyed the damage. It tore his shirt. But that was fine. It didn't make much progress on his skin—barely even left white marks there.

With how many Levels he had poured into Indomitable Hide, cutting damage was simply not the way to hurt him.

He looked at the spot where the Monster vanished. It was nice to know at least that not all of the Monsters in here were like the things out front. At least—they could not hurt him the same way.

Zane wondered if he'd refined his bones and organs if those Wardens would've bounced off him. Just like the shadow.

Reina ran up to check in on him, but Zane showed her his abs. He was okay.

They kept going. And as they went, Zane extended the range of Sage Mind, trying to get a hint if more were coming. He couldn't really probe those shadows—the mini-map couldn't either. It made a dense solid wall. When he tried chucking a little fireball of Stormfire in, it burned bright for a few seconds—but it was like trying to burn the deep ocean. The darkness moved like water, swamped back in… in seconds it reasserted itself.

There was some high-level Law at play there, Zane felt. Something related to the corrupted nature of the realm itself. Maybe if he went all-out, he could get rid of most of it. But it would not be a very good use of his powers right now.

He kept moving. Trying to keep as alert as he could.

"Incoming!" called Avery.

An instant later, Zane felt a flicker of killing intent. His eyes darted left—*Gotcha.*

He rammed out a fist.

It turned out he did not get it.

He actually missed by quite a bit.

By then the Monster had already gotten in a flurry of free slashes. But a hasty grab later Zane managed to get his hand around its throat. He held it there wriggling and frothing.

He felt a brief flicker of satisfaction.

He tried to squish it in his fist. The thing gave a little shriek, dissolved in his fist, and sped away, a pool of shadow.

Zane frowned as he watched it go.

… This was very birdlike behavior.

Before it could get all the way away though, Evan let out a cry. "Hiya!" A brilliant beam lashed out so fast it was instantaneous like the sun coming out—so fast the speed of light beat the speed of dark. And he caught the thing going back, speared the shadow to the ground.

There it spasmed and shrieked—before Evan pounced on it, slashing and slashing and slashing—until he finished it.

He hopped up and instantly looked up at Zane, all excited and hopeful.

Zane gave him a pat. "Good job."

Evan beamed.

They kept moving like this. Zane being big and obvious in front, getting ambushed, getting scratched up a few times—before Evan nailed them and cut them up. He was getting faster and faster at it.

Avery was getting better at sensing them coming too. She could give a little cry—"Left!" "Right!"—sometimes Evan caught them before they even got to Zane.

Evan got some good Levels—essence and Skills—out of it.

It worked out all the way down the main road. Zane kept plodding forward, happily meatshielding. Drawing the Monsters out. They didn't seem to be very smart—just fast and aggressive. It made them pretty easy to pick off.

So far this section felt a good deal easier than the front gates. Reina felt it was too, but not by as much as Zane thought—he was just better suited for it. If a less resistant person than Zane came in here, someone without a Godbeast Bloodline, they would've been shredded very fast. If Reina and Avery and Evan came in alone… it wouldn't have been pretty. She felt it was also a matchup thing.

It was still early going yet, though. These things felt like scavengers to her, like vermin—lurking in abandoned buildings, hiding in the shadows. They were nowhere near the main event. Zane agreed. He didn't mind—it was a good breather.

Soon the main road started opening out. The buildings faded back—and they hit the namesake of the section. This had to be the grand

Plaza.

It wasn't so grand anymore. Mostly flat.

You could tell the open spaces where the life used to be. Where market stalls might've been once. There was a circle of giant pedestals ringing the middle—no statues.

The only thing there stood in the very middle.

Well of Hrothgar [Earth (D)]

The well where dwarves would gather and toss their most precious metals down to the farthest depths of the Earth as tribute to the god of plenty, Hrothgar, for use in his deep-planet Forge.

Legend has it those metals, accumulated over millennia, melded in a single most precious alloy at its very bottom…

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217. Stronghold Siege (II)

There was a statue of a Dwarf God up front. With a beard so long you could hardly see his face. Or body. One long knotty beard with gleaming rings and coins woven through it—they looked expensive, all precious metal. And they were scaled up to size too. Zane wondered why the things dwarves built were so big when they were so small.

Anyway.

Right behind that statue lay the site of the treasure. A well. It was made of a polished, deep-black stone, the kind that sucked in light and refused to give it back. It looked like it came from outer space. There was a little temple-thing around it. A nice little roof made of the same stuff. Runes wrapped all over it. Still glowing, surprisingly, after all this time. He wasn't sure what they were meant to be doing though.

It was a simple building. But it did give a kind of sacred feeling. Like it was some important shrine—Zane could see folk praying to it.

A haze of wavy air streamed forward warping the world. A visceral heat. A viscous, heady aura rising from deep within… you could feel the essence in the air, brushing against you like a fine mist as you got close.

A chain dropped deep into that well. So thick it could have been used to anchor cruise ships. Made of the same black stuff. Zane guessed it was tied to the very bottom.

He strode up to it. Gave it an experimental tug.

It wasn't moving.

He frowned, tugged harder. Still nothing.

This surprised him. He half-expected whatever lay down there to come shooting out after that. After breaking tons of stuff back on Earth with the slightest twitch, he knew how much force his tugs had. And his muscles had gotten a whole lot stronger since then too…

He cocked his head at the chain.

Alright. Fine.

He fired up his muscles. Felt his whole back light up with essence, his biceps bulging. He gave it a hard yank. And when it still didn't budge—to his surprise—he brought out the heavy duty stuff.

He burned his Bloodline.

That did it.

He strained hard for three full seconds, arching his whole big back into it, grunting and heaving, power building and building, before he

felt the weight shift.

When it did, the whole plaza shifted with it—started to rumble and quake, like Zane was tugging along the entire tectonic plate. He looked around, a little alarmed, and stopped. Things went still again.

Nothing seemed to have broken. Just a little tremor, looked like. Reina inspected things and felt it was okay to keep going—though she, Avery, and Evan all scrambled back quite a bit.

Zane inspected the well again as they did. Thinking.

He could do with an energy boost before he got going again, he felt. A little snack.

He went up to the statue of Hrothgar. Reached up. Tugged gently on that beard. Hrothgar toppled to the ground. Stone-shards splashed in a giant wave. Spiderweb fissures raced through the plaza. Smoke plumed all over. But the place was pretty broken already—he figured one more wouldn't make much difference.

Zane stepped through the mess, strode up, and started gingerly relieving the statue of those precious metals in the statue's beard. There were a fair few F-grade Earth-treasures, he saw. Lots of nice Spirit Steel. He hoped the guy wouldn't mind, though he swore it glared at him as he went about his business.

One by one, he popped these metals into his mouth. And swallowed.

Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles X -> XI
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles XI -> XII

Nice.

Okay. Back to what he was doing.

He fired up his muscles again. Stomped his feet knee-deep into the granite ground. Set one hand over another on the chain. And started dragging.

It took some hard effort, some serious straining. A few seconds of building to really get going, just like before. But once his power broke through, the Chain kept rising. Faster and faster. He started hauling whole lengths of it out, dumping it casually on the plaza ground.

…There really was a lot of it. It went deeper than he expected.

The more he dragged out, the redder and brighter it got. Even he started huffing and puffing—it took a huge amount of power just to free this thing.

It was probably a reason why no one had taken it all this time, now Zane thought about it.

Now each grab-and-yank was sizzling against his fingertips. The steel was molten white. He felt it coming close, felt that aura rising

fast toward him, rushing up in one huge tide—with one last roar he yanked the treasure over the lip.

He stood there heaving, sweating, staring.

For all that effort it was a surprisingly small thing. Barely bigger than a fist. Well—a typical man's fist. It would fit quite snugly in Zane's palm.

Heart of Steel [Earth (D)]

An alloy blessed by Hrothgar, Dwarven God of Plenty. It is the amalgam of over 10,000 S-rank mortal treasures—and over 20 Earth-rank treasures—placed under conditions of immense heat and essence, submerged in the core of the realm.

It was more than black—blacker than black. No shine to it. But it did give off a strange radiation. The air shivered around it, as though scared to go near it—and it was scalding just to stand in its presence. Zane felt his skin start to glow red. Even just the essence blasting off of it would make for a treasure by itself.

Zane started salivating a little just looking at it. That came out of who knew how many metals thrown in over who knew how many years… But one particular strand of it caught his attention. He swore he felt a familiar resonance…

Somewhere in those thousands of treasures, someone had dropped some Titan Rhino blood in there too.

Suddenly he was a lot more interested.

He went over to it. Studied it for a bit. Then picked it up. It wasn't too hard—he kept his body firing full-force this whole time. Now the Heart just felt heavy to him. But quite holdable.

It was burning his hands though. He heard the flesh sizzling. Which—for a Steel and Fire Law wielder… not good.

And his muscles were really burning up now. So hot they made their own little air-warbles—they started trembling a little, making a strained humming, swallowing up lakes of essence—soon he would start running out.

It was all a little alarming. He did the first thing that came to mind.

He popped the thing into his mouth and swallowed it.

For about one full second he was pretty pleased with his decision. It certainly freed up his hands being burnt. Problem solved.

Then the thing dropped all the way down his throat and hit his belly with a *CLANG!*

And Zane keeled over.

And then he felt quite regretful.

First came all the Essence. Baked into it from all those rich magma flows deep underground for so, so many years… the sounds it made in his belly were the same tons of dynamite made going off deep a

mountain.

He groaned.

He was pretty sure the heat of it ruptured at least one organ.

It got fixed up a moment later though.

Level up!
Essence Level 233 -> 234
Level up!
Essence Level 234 -> 235
Level up!
Essence Level 235 -> 236
Level up!
Essence Level 236 -> 237

This tickled a part of his brain nicely.

The other parts were still on fire though.

By then he had fallen all the way over. He lay there reddening, breathing out streams of steaming mist. He lay, face-planted. He could not seem to move very well.

He heard Reina give a shout, start rushing over. He tried saying “I’m fine," but it was too muffled through the face-plant. It came out as another groan. So he just threw a thumbs-up. She got the message.

After that he focused on surviving.

He felt pretty badly roasted. Scorching hot everywhere—a distinctly strange kind of hot since it was under the skin. Something more than feverish. He was vaguely aware that he was smoking a little. The stone seemed to be melting under him.

The Level-Ups were just the start of it. The next notifications bombarded him—

Bloodline evolved!
5 drops -> 6
6 drops -> 7

He blinked.

Hey, nice.

Bloodline evolutions were some of his favorite. They always opened up new worlds of possibility for him—though he was in a little too much pain to fully enjoy it. This one was a little bittersweet—he was just one shy of what he needed to get the next layer, Bone refinement.

Still though. Two extra drops brought plenty of great upgrades.

Skill evolved!
Indomitable Hide [Rare (E) XII -> Epic (E) VI]
Skill evolved!
Colossal Tendons [Rare (E) VII -> Epic (E) III]
Skill Evolved!

Behemoth Muscles [Rare (E) XII -> Epic (E) V]

And the more it upgraded him, the more bearable all that heat felt inside him. It helped his muscles and his tendons—made it feel like they were being tempered. Made the steel go in easy.

And there was so much steel to take in…

Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VI -> VII
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VII -> VIII
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VIII -> IX

Skill up!
Colossal Tendons III -> IV
Skill up!
Colossal Tendons IV -> V
Skill up!
Colossal Tendons V -> VI

Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles V -> VI
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles VI -> VII
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscles VII -> VIII

It felt like it took hours. When at last it settled he still lay there steaming, cheek pressed against the newly mushy ground.

He blinked. Built himself up to an arm. Got back up.

He felt good. Really good.

Tingly in all the places that had just upgraded. Every muscle, tendon, inch of skin in his body felt remade, reforged. Primed.

If he had this body a few hours ago, he felt he could've yanked out that bead in one fell swoop.

He did also notice how soaked he was. In mud, in his own sweat… he had been sweating that whole time—he was parched.

After all the heat had died down Avery ran back in, summoned some water, and hosed him off. Then she fed him a bucket of water. He needed more—he was all sweated out. So he just opened his mouth and had Avery water-cannon down his throat until he felt fine again.

Then he was washed up. Healed up. Cleaned.

Every bit ready.

At this grade his skin was as pure as it could be already—no blemishes. His muscles were already veined and dense. They didn't look too different. The changes came inside. It was like making a new model of him, he felt—the shape was similar. But the engine got swapped out for something far stronger.

Reina did her usual check up on him. She could tell his body had changed too almost instantly—her eyes widened as she felt him. He told her he was ready for anything they could throw at him. She believed him.

She felt heartened—so did Avery and Evan. Mostly it came from the showing. Putting the deep sense of confidence he felt inside to the outside. It made them feel comfortable. They had to feel like he could never be broken.

He would work hard to make sure close calls like back there—seeing him beaten up that badly, taken to the brink… he would fight hard as he could to make sure that wouldn't happen again.

He stared down the darkness. Clenched his fists.

They were all counting on him to be strong.

Next time, he swore he would leave no doubt.

They kept going.

***

Just more Shadow Stalkers at first. Almost twenty of them running straight at him, though none of them managed much.

It did seem like this first chunk of the realm was just an appetizer.

Soon though the buildings started fading out. They started moving into what would be the outskirts of a normal city. There rivers and grasslands might run. But here it was sulfur-yellow fumes spewing from vents in the ground, and enormous slow-moving rivers of Fire-Law dense lava winding lazily through the ground, dripping from spots in the distant walls… a mosaic of red-white breaking up the dark. Like a starscape set on its side.

They were coming up to a new section.

They heard it before they saw it. The roars. The deep growls which could only come from huge animals. The devilish shrieks. The low, cavernous grunting… the sounds of some hellish menagerie.

They saw it up ahead through a bank of thick yellow fog. A fortress leaking lava. Black as brimstone. It was set atop a high craggy hill. All around that hill, seas of lava stretched far into the distance, bubbling and frothing…

The compass wanted them to go right through that fortress.

The mini-map was swamped with red dots. If you squinted you could see them in the distance, patrolling the parapets—horned fanged winged demons with leathery skin and glistening eyes. Boiling over with dark auras flickering red lightning.

Magma Imp (Monster)
Essence Level 259

And what looked to be giant mastiffs prowling the walls, lava leaking like drool from their lips, sniffing and growling…

Lava Hound (Monster)
Essence Level 258

And there had to be other Monsters deeper inside too. Ones they couldn't even see.

Reina's brow furrowed as she took it all in. Avery and Evan stared too.

You have entered: Section 1-2
Gurin's Stronghold

Then—

Monster House activated!

Zane stilled.

Monster Houses contain hordes of strong Monsters. Your task is to slay every Monster in the House.
Clearance Reward: 4 C-Rank Earth Treasures, tailored to you by the System.
Accept?

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218. Stronghold Siege (III)

“Let me take them,” said Zane. He felt as confident as he’d ever been. Reina put a hand on him, looked to him, a little hesitant, just thinking.

Then—“Alright.” She nodded.

He wanted to just charge up. Rush in, and show them the powers in his hands. That was his most basic instinct, at least.

But he wasn't sure what lay deeper inside—there was a whole horde of fatter red dots in there, out of sight… He looked to Reina. He could tell she had something in mind. He knew she would make good use of him.

He felt he was pretty good at in-the-heat-of-the-moment battle decisions. But when it came to the big picture he trusted her.

Sure enough—“I've got an idea,” she told him slowly. “I think… Here's what we'll do.”

Zane heard her out. And was satisfied with his role in it. There was lots of smashing involved. After inspecting him Reina trusted his new body's durability; his tensed muscles could've been armored plates unto themselves. He would be thrust into the center of things, where he could do the most damage in the least amount of time—whether the entire offense succeeded or failed rested on his shoulders.

He would have it no other way.

Avery and Evan were eager too. And Reina told them their roles, carefully making best use of their strengths, putting them all in the best position to shine.

She would be sticking with Zane the whole time. Healing him, making sure he was healthy. He got the feeling she would be doing that whether it was the best decision or not. He liked having her at his back—it made him feel even more invincible.

That was all then. It was time for Operation Castle Crash.

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You would have to charge up a steep, cruddy hill to get to the fortress. And that was just the start of it—giant tanks of lava crowned the walls. Drawbridges went over gurgling moats. They saw molten boulders hanging off nets, ready to drop. Smoldering cannons peeked out the walls; Magma Imps were operating them. This wasn't Monster make clearly—they'd taken over some old dwarven fortress and made it their own.

It also made it quite finicky to attack. If Zane started charging

uphill right away he would get hit by a lot. At least five or six giant boulders, vats of lava, cannonballs—plus whatever Skill they wanted to throw at him.

But the fortress was just a problem to Reina—a puzzle. Zane knew no one better at solving those. And sure enough, she'd come up with a simple clear strategy.

First a distraction. That was up to Avery. She would throw something way out to the right, something that would catch all those guards' attention. She tried to imagine the scariest thing she could think of charging at her.

She sat there thinking hard for about thirty seconds. Then she had a light bulb moment.

She gave Zane a big grin.

"What," said Zane.

"Hey big fella! Remember that one time in Mount Saint Helens?"

"Uh," said Zane.

Seconds later he was looking at another Zane. Not as he was now—him at full tilt. He had never seen himself like this before, from the outside. His hair was actually floating. His muscles bulged so tight against his skin you could mark out each thick purple vein. And every breath of his was a plume of fuming air; essence trickled out his mouth, like he was part-dragon or something. His eyes were actually crackling a little, bright with Stormfire. His skin too.

"There we go!" said Avery, stepping back to admire her handiwork. "Spot-on, if I do say so myself."

"Do I really look like that?" said Zane, frowning. It would probably work. Still, though… "Huh."

No wonder they got so frightened when he charged. This was… quite something.

"You look very handsome," Reina assured him.

"It's even scarier in person, actually," said Avery cheerfully. "You feel this big looming aura going everywhere—that bit I can't quite get right… but anyway. It'll do just fine!"

She slapped her hands together. "Zane Lite is ready for action!"

Zane Lite gave a big bellow; it sounded like a peal of thunder cracking across the ravaged landscape. And Zane Lite's aura flared to life. You could feel it even in the astral plane—somehow it had a presence, felt real. Even Zane, with his Emperor's Soul, had to really squint to tell it was fake.

"Neat, right?" grinned Avery. Apparently it wasn't really an illusion. It was a simulacrum. Like a shell with nothing in it, according to her. It was one of her new White Fox Bloodline Inheritance Skills. It made for a better distraction than a normal illusion. Much harder to make and control though. She could do it with Zane mostly because

she knew him so well.

“He keeps taking his shirt off so it’s easy to get the anatomy right,” Avery explained, nodding wisely.

“Uh,” said Zane.

“Alright!” cried Avery. “Chaaaaargeee!”

Zane Lite thumped his big chest like a gorilla. Zane was about to protest. That was too much. He would not do that. Then he paused, and thought about it.

Hmm.

Zane Lite steamrolled up the mountain.

The Monsters must’ve thought it was pretty scary too—because they reacted almost instantly. They had already pooled to one side of the fortress once Fake-Zane started making noise. Once he started charging, they started blasting.

Red lightning and black smoke raced down the hill, a downpour from hell. At the same time the floodgates all opened—boulders, lava—it came crashing down in a mad fury.

On the other side, Evan started to do his work too. He started slashing and slashing—little things, quiet things. Cutting off the handles for those boulder-nets. Slicing the wicks off the cannons. He even managed to snipe a few Imps off the top of the walls—he wasn't quite strong enough to one-shot them yet, but he could clip some wings, send them spiraling. Soon he had cleared a solid path for Zane. Not everything—but it would do nicely.

Evan would be master of bird control from here on.

Then it was Zane’s turn at last.

He stood. Go time. Reina was right behind him already buffing him, throwing up a connection, dousing him in a warm wave of regeneration—it came easily to both of them now.

He fired up his muscles. And his Bloodline began to burn.

It started first from the center. His heart pumping faster, stronger, sending vital blood to his thighs, his arms, his back, lighting them up as it passed. Waking them from their slumbers. He felt his body temperature start to skyrocket.

And he began to feel it. That familiar heady rush. Zane stood there, letting it build. Eyes trained squarely on the stronghold.

What happened next would be a matter of timing. He didn't want to burn out too early. He didn’t want to get there too weak either. He wanted to peak—and strike a killing blow as he went.

And now his whole body was fully awake, roaring, burning, steaming essence… he felt it now that he paid attention—the Stormfire crackling over his skin, crackling around his eyes, felt the fuming breaths leaving his mouth like engine exhaust even as he dragged in huge breaths of air—just more fuel…

The air was starting to shiver around him, starting to warp. Mighty rivers of pure energy were rushing out from his heart, pouring in all directions—

He'd never really done this. Sat here, letting it build without releasing any at all—it was kind of torturous. Soon there was so much power inside him he was starting to tremble. He felt his tendons straining with a massive effort—struggling to hold back his muscles, straining too.

It was time.

He bellowed. Thumped his chest.

Blinked.

"…"

That actually felt surprisingly good.

Maybe that guy was onto something.

Then Zane charged.

Unleashed. Exploded. A single enormous bound and he was already a quarter of the way up the giant hill. Reina rushed to catch up, crying out, still holding to the connection—two more bounds, and he was nearly there.

About then the Monsters finally reacted—a snatch of them rushed back screeching, trying to aim their cannons, trying to chuck their boulders—but finding their weapons weren't quite there anymore. A gaggle of Magma Imps showered desperate lightning on him. He felt it running against his muscles, and a few seconds ago he might have seized up.

But there was just too much sheer momentum inside him right now. Too much essence. Too much raw horsepower brimming in every fiber of him.

He crashed right through it.

There was just no stopping him now. He blasted Stormfire Step after Stormfire Step.

At the same time his fist rose, Stormfire brimming at the knuckles—and he crashed through the wall like a wrecking ball.

For a second the explosion painted the world stark blue. The skies, the grounds for miles, shining that same color… The color of Zane's power.

The fortress shivered down to its very foundations. The world shivered with it. Then—all at once—the whole front face came crashing down. Tons upon tons of molten stone.

Most of it right on top of Zane's head.

But he took it just fine.

He had smashed his way on through.

Unfortunately, a whole glut of Monsters had rushed back to that wall—and they fell on Zane's head too.

Dozens of them. Magma imps. Ten-foot-tall hounds with skin the red-black of molten rocks, drooling gobs of lava. All staring stunned.

A bewildered Monster horde… and in the midst of it, one berserking Zane.

He had already wrapped his hands in Chains. And instantly he set to doing what he did best.

Smashing.

He roared. Caught a hound deep on the underside of its jaw, and Stormfire and raw force came together in one brutal combination, and did their brutal work. The head came apart at the seams, blasting away in a thousand chunks of molten rock. Zane bull-rushed another, tackled it to the ground, smashed it to scattered smoking bits in one clean blow.

Stormfire billowed through the courtyard—searing, scalding, lighting the grounds on fire.

But in the chaos they'd really started swarming him. Peppering him with their little Skills. In the distance he felt Avery throwing up a mass spell and a few of them cried out, suddenly stumbling, robbed of all balance. Those missed.

But a good chunk still got through. Those Lava Hounds' jaws unhinged, sank their molten teeth into Zane's thick arms, his legs… and hit a hard wall.

They drew a little blood. Scraped the skin. That was all.

It was as Zane suspected.

This little force was not enough to challenge him.

Then he took his hands to them, and broke them piece by piece.

Then he made the war zone his own bloody playground. All blocks. Coming apart before his fists. He could do anything to them. A swelling pride rose in his chest, swelling more and more the more he wrecked—

This was who he was. The essence of Zane Walker. And he exulted in it.

Zap.

He grunted.

Glared up. A small cloud of imps had come together, was bunching into a literal cloud. A cloud of smoke and red lightning, a little formation—they blasted him again. He gave a little jerk.

It didn't hurt much. Especially with Reina at his back rushing healing into him. But every time they zapped him he seized up a little —it messed up his attacks. Almost made him stumble over himself.

At the same time though… little flashes showered overhead, slamming into the cloud, breaking it up. They fell apart shrieking.

"You leave my friend alone!" came a distant angry cry.

His anti-bird unit was on it.

He just had to keep smashing. And he did so with a pure simple joy.

Lava Hounds exploded to molten rubble. Imps popped in showers of blood and magma. And before long it was all gone. Reduced to magma surging back down the hill…

He had just a moment to breathe.

The first wave was a smashing success. Their strategy—for Zane to tank and smash, Avery to confuse, Reina to heal, Evan to snipe—was working quite nicely.

But that was not the end of the Fortress. That was just the first wall of it.

The bulk of the Monsters were still rushing over. And more were pouring out of the Inner Courtyard too. A dozen giant red dots on the mini-map.

So far, it was all according to plan. They had planned to face the big guns deeper in.

Zane was ready.

Each step thundered the ground. Sank several feet in. They moved with a mechanical precision. Dense auras of Steel and Earth wafted off of them.

They made for a familiar sight.

Warden of Gildrundar (Monster)
Essence Level 265

Zane went still.

Reina a little pale. She was remembering the last time…

Just a look at those too-wide steel smiles, those swollen black-metal bodies, had him breathing heavy.

The Monsters thought they had found weakness in him, when these things had put him down. They had sent more to finish the job…

Maybe they thought these things would strike fear in him.

Zane did not work like that.

He narrowed his eyes. Clenched his fists. And his fighting spirit erupted.

It was a mistake, sending these things after him again.

He would see who broke who this time.

Round two.

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219. Stronghold Siege (IV)

Evan was padding up a few dozen paces behind Zane, picking off the Imps whizzing above.

The heavy-duty stuff was all up to Zane.

He remembered the last time he found these Wardens. They had ambushed, cornered him and his friends—he had to throw himself at them. Right in the midst of them. And all those fists had crashed down on him…

He frowned.

He had fought like a cornered beast back then. Let himself go wild. It was how he could unleash the most damage. But that was how they had put him down in the end…

It was easy to let that sense of burgeoning pride so fierce in his chest, that heady rush, carry him off—especially with his Bloodline burning at its peak, when godly powers coursed through him. He didn't even know he was doing it—not at first. Like being taken by any passion.

They would not get the chance to put him down again.

He'd known not to let his pride carry him off. But he also hadn't really, deep-down. Then he had his skull and half the bones in his body broken. It was not so easy to beat messages into him, but that did it. It was what the Barbarian Sage had said all along.

He clenched his fists as he stared the Wardens down. Filing out in one bleak wall. Stomping over to face him.

He should not have let himself get dropped like that. Especially at just the front gate. Showing weakness when his friends needed him most... was not acceptable to him.

Now when he looked again—even as his body raged and strained and burned, shot through with essence, when his heart beat a war-drum in his ears—his eyes stayed narrowed. Focused.

This time—no sloppiness.

Now was time for execution.

And he felt something resonate in his soul. The powers of his Bloodline, his Title. Going off all at once…

He took the fight to them.

He unraveled his Chains. And set them all on Stormfire.

The Monsters stepped closer and closer, drowning him in *CLANG-CLANGs*, staring him down too—and those little gnarled souls began to smolder. Clouds of hate rose over them in the Astral Plane…

Zane raised his fists. His Chains whipped high. He looked back to Reina, and in their connection she got what he would do without his telling her. She nodded—and he knew she had his back.

Zane bellowed.

The battle began. He had a very simple idea.

Last time they had wrong-footed him. Changed the field in their favor, where they could swarm him all at once. Not this time.

This time… he dusted off a very old Skill. One of the very first he had ever learned. Supercharged with Stormfire— and the monstrous amount of strength coursing through every fiber of him—

Skill evolved!
Inferno Lash -> Stormfire Lash [Common (E)]

Zane smashed.

Not at the Monsters. He had not used this Skill in so long. He knew it would not be enough to wreck them.

But it could wreck everything around them.

His Chains whipped high into the air—and crashed to either side.

The Fortress exploded in blinding light.

Stormfire ravaged the world. Chain Combustion ran its course, blasting over and over, bombing out the world in searing blue-white—and Zane changed the face of the battlefield.

A massive chunk of Fortress sloughed off to the right. Dropping fast down the slope in a sludgy pile, splashing deep into the lava ocean, Hounds scrabbled inside of it, going under, howling, crushed under the weight of it—

The same thing happened to the left, too.

Then there was just one path between them. And him. A quickly narrowing path. One high mountain pass with fire on either side—barely big enough for two of them to come at him, one on either side…

They blinked. Stunned for only a second.

Then began their whirring again. Then their cold confidence, their will to crush him, took hold.

They came for him crashing, stomping, groaning deeply.

Only now he had lined them up for him.

His Chains raced back to him, still blazing, coiled fast around his fists—he smashed them together, felt the satisfying ring of it…

It was time.

Execution.

***

Zane erupted. Slammed down a Stormfire step—and this time there were only two in front of him. A lumbering blow swung for him, an avalanche of an arm—but he had exploded so fast, so fierce, it hardly

looked like the arm was moving at all.

He easily ducked under. And slammed a Stormfire Punch through its giant belly. He sank in deep, grabbed the core, and ripped it out with a bare fist—even as the explosion ripped through the hollows of its body, flared its red eyes blue-white.

His other fist crushed its face in. And that massive tin can sagged. Ruined.

But more massive arms were still coming for him. The other Warden. And it wasn't just trying to smash him—it was trying to grab him to hold him, tube-like fingers outstretched and he saw, just behind it, two other Wardens rushing up, arms raised, ready to clobber him—

But Zane still came too fast.

His reaction time was still not the best. With his new tendons, though, his action time shocked even himself.

An explosion of movement later and he grabbed the reaching Warden right back. Slammed his fists into its chest. Then, straining and groaning, heaved it all the way up—just in time to ram it into the cobbles behind.

The Wardens' own fists rained down on their comrade, crushing deep into its back, shattering well-oiled joints—and for a moment they were locked there. Zane, used the crushed Warden as his shield. The other two Monsters on the other side, tried to crush him deeper and deeper. Steel-powered body wrestled against steel-powered body…

But this was a contest of power. Against Zane. You did not do that.

His muscles alone would have gotten the job done.

But he stomped, once, twice, and slammed through his makeshift shield, slammed the Wardens on the other side, toppling hundreds of tons of steel on their backs like giant dominoes—

At last he ripped out the core-heart of his shield-Warden. Heaved it down into the lava-sea. Leaped over, just as those two downed Wardens behind it were trying to get back up to their knees, their feet —

Zane savaged them.

CLANG-CLANG! His fists dropped like hammer-blows. Crushing them to their knees. Then crushing them flat. Then gone. He remembered when this material had felt hard to him… now it gave so easily beneath his hands.

Smashing them was deeply satisfying to Zane.

The spiking pain in his own hands was nothing to him. Already as he stood, heaving, it was quickly fading—he felt the bulk of Reina's healing powers falling on just his big weapons. Mending the bones…

As he stood there, heaving in deep breaths, over the corpses of his fallen enemies, he felt a familiar swelling of pride—of Bloodline

singing through every fiber of him…

The rest of the horde was still marching for him.

He wanted, in that moment, to ram himself straight through. To bowl through them one by one, to get right in the thick of them, to test all the raw might of his body against theirs, all at once. And then they would see who would come out on top. He knew it would be him.

Still. That feeling was not so overwhelming anymore. He did not give himself to it so easily, did not let himself go like that. He stood there, whole body one great pyre of feeling, of essence, of Bloodline—felt that rush sweeping all the way through him—and held his will like an iron fist over his mind.

He held his focus. He stayed in the eye of the storm.

He put his fists up.

Just as the next pair came for him. And he eviscerated them with brutal, sure strokes. Crushed, ducked, smashed—Sent one of them flying off the edge, folded another clean in two, crushed in the heart of a third. Pure violence. He felt just then he was wielding every ounce of the vast power coursing through his body to its maximum—

Skill up!
Stormfire Punch IV -> V

His head stayed clear, and sharp, and as he flowed through their falling corpses, streaming fire, driving the engine of his body—

He crushed in one more head. Bellowed.

Something clicked. Deep in his soul.

The swelling of pride, of power, of spirit, running through him—the pride of the Titan Rhinoceros. Mastered at last.

The image of the Titan Rhinoceros flickered over him. A shining phantom rising over his head—and when he bellowed, an echo of that ancient beast blasted out too. Shaking the world…

When he stepped then—it did not feel like just him stepping. There was an otherworldly weight to it, a weight of lost history—Titan Rhinoceroses across the vast expanse of time lent him their strength. When he charged, the spirit of a Godbeast charged with him.

And it felt like Zane's body had shifted into a new gear. He accelerated so fast he almost lost control again—smashed through a Warden, sent it rocketing twenty, thirty feet back, smashing the Wardens behind it, and the Wardens behind those—it flattened. And flattened everything it passed.

He blinked at the smoking wreckage of his fist. Still heaving in thick breaths.

Skill unlocked!
Titan Rhinoceros Bloodline Manifestation

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220. Stronghold Siege (V)

Skill unlocked!

Titan Rhinoceros Bloodline Manifestation

Burning Bloodline calls the souls of the ancients to the wielder's aid. When the wielder fights, their lineage fights with them. Sharply boosting Bloodline powers for a short duration. Scales with Bloodline amount.

Zane felt it instantly even without moving. His body felt strangely light, hundreds of tons of steel going weightless at once. Each muscle fiber, each strand of tendon hummed, charged by some vast power. Everywhere he looked inside him. His strength, explosiveness, toughness… all that made the Titan Rhinoceros skyrocketed.

And the aura of a Godbeast raged out of him.

He looked up. It was just six Wardens left all of a sudden. Staring at him.

Zane had everything he needed now—more than enough. It was time to finish things. Any way would do it. He was brimming with so much power it poured off his body in waves of billowing gray. Rushing furious into the world…

He looked at his hands—they must've been broken six or seven times that fight. They were still broken. Mending. He heard Reina gasping behind him—she was sputtering out too. She had been diligently throwing everything she had into healing him this whole time.

He frowned. He decided he would spare her some. He still didn't have Bloodline through his bones. He wasn't even sure how hard he hit in this state… he might blow up his arms if he used his fists.

He stood there, still exploding with aura. Deciding. And still no one on the battlefield dared move. It was nice, being able to choose how to finish things.

It was kind of weird too. He was not even doing anything. And he could feel how his new aura weighed on them. It swamped them in dense cascades—they felt they were being slowly crushed. It was what mortals felt standing in the presence of a deity. It made them feel like insects. Easily crushed, awaiting his judgment.

Zane made his choice.

A breath later, his hammers dropped mid-air—and started to rise. Slowly, twin suns arching through the sky, brightening as they did,

blazing up with Stormfire. At the same time a steely gray sheen poured over them too, shimmering, two coronas crowning the same star.

Zane took a deep breath. And drew deep within him.

The stars went supernova.

The sound alone rocked the cavern, shook fissures out of the ground. His hammers flickered gray-white-blue, shining so bright they all seemed to meld to one hue of purest stark white—

Heat-waves struck the world. So vicious they softened sheets of lesser steels.

His Chains began to tremble.

Still, the Wardens stood there, staring. The sight was not computing to them. They didn't even bother moving—almost like they had short-circuited. They were frozen at the sight of him. They felt the power blazing at them. It was too much for them to understand.

They were not built to take this kind of power.

Zane gave a final bellow. And dropped a world-ender right over their heads.

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
237 -> 240

***

Azure Flame Faction
??? Quadrant

Past the rings where the Outer Faction Planets made their slow long journeys, there was a smaller, more exclusive clutch of planets. Set close to the Azure Flame Faction's home star.

There, the most powerful folk the Azure Flame Faction had to offer made their homes. There lay the rings of the Inner Faction.

Most of the folk in these regions paid little attention to the Integrations. They'd lived through thousands of them—seen countless talents come and go. To these galactic powerhouses, talent was cheap. They only paid attention when they saw geniuses rise to join their ranks. And even then—not much.

A certain Grand Elder was no different most of the time.

He made his domain in the most distant orbit of the Inner Faction. Very far from the others powerhouses. A small string of planets and asteroids and moons, all hidden in an exclusive belt. A long seam in spacetime. Some of the galaxy's most potent anti-detection wards lay scattered throughout, leading would-be visitors in strange circles in space, chasing mirages. Making the place near-impossible to find. He

made his own little pocket dimension in space—where he and his closest disciples practiced in deep seclusion.

He so seldom left his home that his existence had become a myth in the Azure Flame Faction. Even the Patriarch had thought he'd died for a few millennia. Until the Faction came under dire threat at the hands of the Monster Emperor Raizen, and he was forced to emerge from his seclusion. There—in one brutal move—he struck down his foe. And reminded the galaxy that one of its most powerful forces still lived.

The Elder was thin. With a wispy white beard, cold eyes, and several fingers were missing on each of his hands, taped over. Blackened with burn-marks.

He sat there meditating as he had for thousands of years. Buried deep in the core of his private star—a star wreathed in stark blue flames.

It had to be placed a great distance away from even the other celestial bodies in its territory. Just being in its presence would melt other stars. These flames had a way of jumping great distances, too—like lightning in storms…

This Elder was as far from worldly affairs as one could be.

Only this year news had reached him from the Outer Faction. From the scant few planets belonging to the Path of Stormfire, where he was the patron Sage.

A pre-Integration native had seen the sermon he had given millions of years ago. And pursued the path he had made. The path of Pseudo-Stormfire.

Not only that—this native had walked the path all the way to true Stormfire and even to Chain Combustion. Alone, with the base resources of a pre-Integration planet…

That was how Sage Noughtfire came to know the name 'Zane Walker.'

***

Steelheart Conclave Observatory

They watched as Zane struck his finishing blows.

A silence.

Then—

"That's what I'm talking about!" cackled the Barbarian Sage. He slammed his fist on the steel table. The sound of it cracking echoed through the Observatory, making a few of the Scouts cringe.

"Very impressive," said the Head Scout.

"So," said the Sage. "How much've we set aside for him?"

"10,000 peak Sky stones, honored Elder," said the Scout.

"10,000?!" The Barbarian Sage's face turned stony then. Stony enough to unsettle everyone there. Which was saying something in the

Steelheart Conclave, a Faction which had no lack of stony severe faces.

A pause.

"So," said the Sage. "You mean to insult me."

The head Scout hesitated. "Err—"

"How dare you allocate such a—a piddling sum—to my fated successor!" he roared.

Everyone in the room did a double-take at that. They blinked at one another, like they were thinking, *your what now*?

But the Barbarian Sage was not done. "You go back to Treasury Elder," he rambled. "And tell that old turtle, if he insists on showing me no face I will be forced to pay him a visit! Ten thousand—pah! I've never been more insulted—never in all my years!"

Everyone's face went quite pale at that. The Barbarian Sage might be ages out of practice but he was still a legend in the sect. His name was still ranked among the highest on the Monster kill leaderboards across all the Inner Faction. They all knew that it was he who had famously slaughtered the 'Three Great Calamities'—the True Dragons Ryujin, Drakorath, and Seraphon, each a Level 500+ powerhouse. All in the space of one legendary battle.

The head Scout tried to choose his words very carefully then.

"Master Sage," he tried. "Even the Patriarch, when he was being recruited, only received ten thousand stones—it's a very high purse, Master—truly a reasonable one."

At that, the Barbarian Sage let out a loud humph. "Do I seem like a reasonable man to you?!"

They were all well and truly speechless at that.

"Go! When you come back, I expect to see more zeros on that big board. Many more!" he bellowed.

The head Scout could only wince and scramble off.

"Hmph!" said the Sage, crossing his arms. Though inside he was chuckling as he settled back.

Of course he did not actually expect many more zeros. But by threatening to kick up a fuss he could at least squeeze out a few thousand extra stones. Which could put them over the top. The Barbarian Sage was happy to be a little unreasonable. It was, in his experience, one of the best ways to get things done.

He also simply got a kick out of screwing with the young ones. Everyone here was hardly a millennium—how nervous they got when he threw tantrums tickled him. They got more nervous back when he was at his peak—he frowned down at his lean old muscles, sighed. Still, this would do nicely.

He looked back at the projection and grunted.

He was convinced now it would be an absolute travesty if they lost

Zane Walker to the Azure Flame Faction.

Not on his watch!

***

After the fight, Zane's brain hurt.

He wondered if it was because he was not used to using it so much.

"…"

This was a bit of a depressing thought for him. He figured… probably not. It just took a lot out of him, in soul and will, to focus in that state. He didn't really think everything through often—that was not him. Instead he felt the right thing to do in each moment. Changing up the battlefield for him had been an instinct. It came to him—it was an old sixth sense, something ingrained deep in him.

Only... he did find he needed to keep a bit of a cool head to focus on it, to act on it. When all those intense feelings started rushing at him, it took some effort not to get overwhelmed by anyone.

Then he could get the job done.

Afterward it was like his personal cheerleading squad came pattering up to him. It was Avery and Evan, rushing over. Evan was happy for him all the time. Avery was happy because she didn't have to get hit since he got hit for her. She just had to hit things and run behind Zane. Which was her favorite kind of battle.

Reina was quite relieved. Which she showed by throwing herself at him and kissing him.

They all sat back and surveyed the ruined battlefield. The hill had mostly been flattened. They could see the path beyond. It wound on and on between seas of lava until it faded into the far distance. It got foggy there, misty, murky—the lava started shoring up. Gave way to what seemed to be giant lakes of turgid water, shrouded in the mists. Zane wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but he swore he saw shadows big as mountains lurking in the fog, shifting slowly...

There was a clear division between them. A new section, a new chunk of the realm.

They would get there eventually. But first—

Rewards earned!
10 Drops of Titan Rhino Bloodline [Earth (C)]
10 Drops of Nymph of the World Tree Bloodline [Earth (C)]
10 Drops of Raijuu Bloodline [Earth (C)]
10 Drops of White Fox Bloodline [Earth (C)]

Four bottles topped in silk floated before them, twinkling. And inside lay wells of shining blood.

This came as a doozy. They all gasped. That amount of Bloodline… They almost couldn't believe it. Then again—the system did promise C-rank Earth treasures…

For Reina, Avery and Evan it would help them unlock entirely new tiers of Bloodline Skills—it would quadruple how much Bloodline they had. So far they had really just scratched the surface of what they could do. Reina's new Bloodline had boosted her body and healing powers a good deal, and Avery could make fancier simulations. Evan could snipe better—but they all had so much farther to go. None of them had even gotten their manifestations yet.

They were all excited to see what they could do after this.

For Zane, meanwhile, it would more than double his Bloodline in an instant. He would finally snag that Bone upgrade. Maybe even go beyond that.

He was eager to get started.

First, though—Reina took a look at their little nub of a hill, hands on hips. She decided it wouldn't do. She closed her eyes, raised her hands. And a soft green glow settled over her.

Grass sprouted at her feet. Right in the midst of the ash, lush and bright, cropping up all over, making a blanket. A crisp spring breeze wafted over, ushering away the smoke. Saplings sprouted around the edges, trunks quickly thickening… a cool aura sprouted with it. An aura of healing, and growth, and renewal. A sense of spring.

A Sanctuary of the Mistress Maker has been created
Temporary Safe Zone
While active, the regeneration, healing, and mental acuity of all present are boosted

Zane didn't even know she could do that. She had a way of making everywhere she went nicer.

Then she set down a picnic blanket. She felt they should have a break to absorb things after all that fighting. So first they had a nice lunch. Reina brought sliced-up ghost fruit, and marshmallows for Avery, and golden apple juice for Evan, and Zane got two giant legs of mutton he happily chomped on. It replenished them in essence and soul.

After that—they settled down with their tomes in their little corners of the grove. Bellies full, rested. Ready.

Zane brought out the Vial, felt the reassuring weight of it against his fingertips, the pressure of it wafting against his soul in the Astral Plane… ten silvery drops. So dense they looked like molten steel. So thick when you tilted the glass, it took a good ten seconds for it to hit the other side. That was the good stuff.

He uncorked it. And began to drink.

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221. The Lake District (I)

Zane drank. And beads of Bloodline trickled down his throat one by one.

They slid through—scalding hot, startlingly dense, impossibly heavy for something so small. Something between liquid and solid. Teeming with godly power.

It dropped slowly past his mouth, his throat, his belly… landed. And made its presence known.

BOOM.

The essence unloaded into him—he felt the rush of it as it swept into his Core, that furnace inside him always churning, always grinding away. It could always use new fuel.

Level up!
Essence Level 240 -> 241

And Zane kept drinking.

Before he'd been cautious taking Godbeast bloodline. It was dangerous stuff. But nowadays he felt his new body could take a lot more. He had put a lot of explosive stuff in his belly and been just fine. He had learned he could take a lot.

He tipped over the vial, and let it through drop by drop.

Explosions rocked his insides, licked searing tongues up and down his belly.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 241 -> 244

So far he took it well enough, though. Winced a little—that was all. And meanwhile…

Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
7 drops -> 10 drops

Nice.

Just then—

You have hit 1% Bloodline Saturation.

1%? That meant a full Bloodline was a thousand or so drops. And he had ten. It was kind of mind-boggling.

He wondered just how strong he was meant to be when he got it all.

New power kept dropping into him.

Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
10 drops -> 12 drops

He was already ready for Bone tempering. He'd unlocked that at 8 drops—nearly right away.

Sweat beaded off his forehead. He turned a little red all over. He hunkered down. He wanted to finish it off.

At the same time, a little breeze picked up around him, fluttering his hair, cooling him off—he appreciated again just how thoughtful Reina was. He gave her a fond look. She had her eyes closed—she was absorbing too.

Right. Finish up now—make use of it after.

He kept chugging. Power kept rushing down his throat.

Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 244 -> 246

The higher the Level, the less it felt each drop helped him, as always—especially now he was getting close to Level 250. The gains weren't like they'd been at the start. But the Blood… He felt that deeply, right away.

Dissolving all through his body. Pooling with the rest of his powers, dispersing into his muscles, his skin, his tendons, drop by drop…

The notifications bombarded him.

Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
Bloodline increased!
12 drops -> 17 drops

And at last the vial was empty. Zane let out a steaming breath. Blinked.

That went pretty good. Then—

Skill evolved!
Behemoth Muscles [Epic (E) VIII -> Mythic (E) IV]

Skill evolved!
Indomitable Hide [Epic (E) IX -> Mythic (E) V]

Skill evolved!
Colossal Tendons [Epic (E) VI -> Mythic (E) III]

He patted his belly happily. He felt flushed all over. Bursting with new energy.

Since he'd come into the Super dungeon, his progress had been the best it had ever been. By a big margin. He kept refining his body over and over…

He already felt strong. Now as he flexed his hand, made a fist, even he didn't know just how much power he could muster. Every evolution made a huge difference—and he'd just swallowed so much Bloodline he hopped a rarity realm. He was pretty sure that had never happened before.

First, though, he needed to make sure his new body could take it.

He turned, at last, to Bone.

It was time.

***

"Returned have you?" said the Barbarian Sage. The Sage harrumphed. "Good. Then you've got heart, disciple. Less than one in a hundred make it to this point! Even among the strong-willed. But now it drops to one in ten thousand…"

The Barbarian Sage waved a giant dismissive hand.

"But you're here. Which means such a number will not shake you. If you're here, you have that rare concoction of bravery, ambition, stubbornness, and a little madness, which yields great things. Now is not the time to turn back, disciple—onward!"

Zane nodded. It had not even crossed his mind.

"Let me introduce you… the Bastion Bone!"

***

A vision flared to life. It showed two Titan Rhinos standing on opposite ends of a barren craggy valley. Dark clouds lined the distance. Black mountains ringed them; forks of purple lightning cracked across the peaks.

But in this valley, it was calm. Still.

The only tension came from the Rhinos themselves. Glaring murder at each other. Snorting and pawing.

To the side there was a third Rhino—a female one, watching on with a worried look. Zane wasn't sure how, but he got the feeling she thought the whole thing was a bit much.

"We are about to witness," said the Barbarian Sage, "Two males fighting over a mate—a common occurrence in the species. Given the

pride of the Titan Rhino."

Ah.

"This scene shall demonstrate the power of Bastion Bone in battle. Pay attention to how their horns channel their Bloodlines!"

Both beasts were pawing at the ground. Both beasts started lowering their horns—they looked like the prows of icebreaker ships. Proud and shiny, jutting high, thick as pillars.

The Rhinos were getting ready to charge.

One Rhino was the bigger, more muscular. The other was more lean, explosive, speedy—it moved in twitches.

They started snorting at each other—and nearly at the same time, their Bloodlines began to burn.

Their bodies seethed aura. The still air grew disturbed, started swirling as they pawed harder, bellowing. Working up to fighting form.

Zane—naturally—was rooting for the big one.

Meanwhile he paid close attention to how their horns took the Blood. The horns began shining with it, growing thick with it—he saw Blood racing through every last inch, filling them up. And they grew denser, and denser, and denser…

But that wasn't all. The Bloodline lent the metal a structure too, wove it together, changed its patterns, its shapes, at a tiny level. Made it robust—kind of like the shapes Zane would imagine you'd see if you put kevlar under a microscope. They kept weaving over each other even as the horns grew denser. Reinforcements over reinforcements…

It chained all the way down their skeletons. Until they were both musclebound fortresses. Zane had a hard time imagining either one cracking.

The two beasts shot one last bellow at one another. And charged.

Speedy launched first—then the duel seemed over before it even began. Speedy came so fast, so explosively, Muscles could hardly even react. It crossed the field in two blasts. Muscles had to rear back, caught off guard, jerking its horn up just to block.

The crash rattled the world. The forces involved could've torn up tectonic plates on Earth, Zane was sure—but ramming against each other they just about cancelled out. Held to a near standstill. Shivering both beasts where they stood.

Then Speedy launched again and Muscles was forced to give ground, growling… On the third go-round Muscles wasn't quick enough to block all the way. And it took a vicious wound all the way up its flank. Shining silver blood dripped over desolate ground…

Muscles' skin tore. A few muscles did too. But those ultra-dense bones took all that force firmly. Absorbing it. Dispersing it. Hardly rattling.

Its big horn stayed dense as ever.

Another exchange, and another, and it started taking more slashes up its sides, up its face—another massive wound crossed up its hide. To the side the female rhino started whining, concerned. Zane was getting worried too.

But then—six or seven exchanges in—the fight started growing even. To Zane's relief.

Each charge, Speedy came on less fiercely than the last. It could never gore Muscles all the way through. It was growing frustrated. Each block only grew firmer and firmer. Soon Muscles started crushing back. Smashing harder. Taking the front—after a particularly vicious block, it slammed Speedy hard. And the smaller rhino stumbled back, horn vibrating with the force of it…

It was all quite educational for Zane. He was pretty sure he almost had the Skill down.

Muscles kept building, descending on Speedy, landing heavier and heavier, horn striking bowling over horn, Bloodline raging against Bloodline—**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

Speedy started getting thrown off-balance. Its blocks grew desperate. Until finally, horn flaring bright with blood, Muscles roared. And smashed it so hard it sent Speedy careening over its side.

Then it stomped on the fallen beast and lowered its horn over Speedy's face.

Speedy closed its eyes. Snorted. Zane could tell it was too prideful to admit it. But in the end, it lowered its head and yielded. In the end, the bigger one won.

Zane nodded. Yes. This fit his worldview rather nicely.

In the meantime—

Skill learned!
Bastion Bone [Mythic]

Muscles turned around, triumphant, and trotted back to the female rhino, who looked a bit over the whole thing. She looked relieved too. She nuzzled Muscles.

But it wasn't over.

Just then, Speedy pawed his way back up. Beady angry eyes trained on Muscle's back. Its Bloodline started simmering at a low boil—like it was getting ready to charge. Throw a sucker-punch right at the beast's exposed flank. Zane frowned.

The female rhino saw all of it though—and she had had enough. She rushed straight at Speedy, snarling. Speedy looked surprised—then cringed, and whimpered. And sped away with its tails between its legs.

Snorting, the female rhino trotted back to Muscles' side, who stood

there blinking at her.

The scene ended there.

***

Huh.

This all felt strangely familiar to Zane. He couldn't quite place why, though.

Anyway.

He got what he came for.

He could already feel the Bloodline seeping into him—creeping past the skin, the muscles, the tendons, and moving, at last. To bone.

He got ready for the hurt. For a blissful second he thought maybe this time it wouldn't happen.

Then he hunched over and groaned.

And promptly started turning red again.

His whole body, every bone, flared inside him.

It felt like his bones had been transformed to hot tongs. And were determined to melt their way out of him. The little bones stabbed like pokers. The big bones sat like hot coals.

He had never thought about how many bones were inside his body. Until they were all howling agony at him. It was enough to make his head spin.

And the feeling only got more intense the more Bloodline seeped into him… he was beginning to sweat. Just a few minutes in, he saw a sheen of black bile rising over his skin. The weaknesses in his bones being flushed out.

He could tell this would take a while. He hunkered down for it. This was about to be nasty.

Then he heard a gasp. Reina rushed over, put her hands on his bare back—and a soothing current washed all over him, sweeping away the bile, the sweat… suddenly his Bloodline went in a lot smoother. His head felt a lot clearer. It blunted the worst of the pain too.

Reina, he thought happily, and felt all warm in his chest.

***

An hour later…

Skill upgraded!
Bastion Bone I -> II

Most of the time when Zane got a big Bloodline upgrade, he felt it instantly. This time he felt a pleasant burning all through his skeleton, the vague, hard-to-place feeling that he was a lot denser—like a bunch of air pockets, little weaknesses in his skeleton, had been sealed up. But that was all.

He tried burning a smidge of Bloodline and felt a warmth flowing through his bones, starting from the big ones. Near his Core. Felt

himself sinking a little into the ground. Growing denser, bone by bone…

He would need to throw himself at something to test it out, he felt.

Hm.

He told Reina he would be back.

He walked back to the city proper, found a statue made of high-grade Spirit Steel. Zane threw a hard punch.

It instantly folded in two. He hardly even felt it on his knuckles. Earth-grade sheet metal felt like tissue paper.

He kept going. Picked out a random temple, gave it a kick. Sent it flying roof-over-floor, crashing heavy to the middle of a square. His toes felt perfectly fine. He burned a little Bloodline, got his muscles flowing a little, gave a skyscraper a good old whack—and it was like he had taken a sledgehammer to a Lego building. The thing did not just come apart. It blasted apart—he saw chunks flying for miles, shooting into the ceiling like cannonballs.

His fist still held strong.

He hadn't tested it at full strength. But he was pretty sure he wouldn't have to worry about breaking anytime soon.

For a while there, it had been disturbing to him that he could break. He was so used to walking through everything. It had been a comfort.

All felt right in the world again.

He looked around the city. Broke some more stuff, just for the fun of it. It felt like this whole place was made of cardboard.

He ambled his way back satisfied. Ready.

***

World Tree Temple
Heart Grove

A breathless crowd had gathered around the Heart Grove. Waiting.

It was rumored that today was the day 'Prince of Flowers' Val Arandor, Chosen of the World Tree Temple, was finally exiting his long seclusion—and his many admirers had lined up to see it.

Sure enough a beautiful elf-man soon emerged beneath the scarlet boughs, and the crowd went wild. It was mostly noble elf-ladies of high birth, showering adulation on him. He gave them easygoing smiles, blew soft kisses to the crowd. Petals drifted behind him as he stepped, wafting an intoxicating scent. Drawing swoon after swoon.

His servant Luthor greeted him at the end of the lane. "Congratulations, milord. You're now the youngest Nascent Soul cultivator the World Tree Faction has seen in three millennia."

"Five, actually," said Val airily, checking his nails. "But who's counting? You look dull as ever. And how's my Lord Father?"

“In something of a difficult state,” said Luthor, wincing. “That’s why I’m here, in fact. He’s summoned you. Your future—and the family’s—is at stake. He’s got plans in motion.”

“—doesn’t he always?—”

“—There will be quite an important role for you. It’ll play to your strengths.”

“In cultivation?” Val winked at an elf-girl as they passed, who nearly fainted on the spot. Val smirked.

“In… other matters.”

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222. The Lake District (II)

Val Arandor met his father in the Evergreen Grove, situated on the highest bough of the World Tree. The floors were thick wood branches, clustered tight. The ceilings a spray of silver and lush green. Sunlight streamed through in clean shafts. Light birdsong warbled throughout.

It was a cheery scene. But Lan Arandor seemed anything but.

"Father!" said Val, grinning as he strode in. "Why the glum face?"

"The Mistress Maker has been reborn," rasped Lan.

"Ahh," said Val. He cocked his head. "But that's hardly cause for concern. Who is it? The Sylvarii, perhaps? Or Elia, of the Amaraels? Lovely girl. She still sends me flowers. Isn't it as you always say, Father? No matter who it is, the Mistress Maker will need a Maker consort… And she would only choose the best of the best. In that, the choice is obvious."

He made a little bow, smirking. "You needn't fret, Father. One way or another house Arandor shall reign."

"That's the trouble," said Lan heavily. "It's none of the Great Families. A pre-Integration native girl has been chosen as the next Mistress."

Val had to frown at that. He knew all the elite heiresses—knew they were all quite comely, of high breeding. Some native, on the other hand… "Show me?"

Luthor produced a still picture, gathered straight from the scrying glass.

At the sight of her, Val's eyes popped. "She's…heavens—she's lovely!" he breathed. His face went slack.

"Her name is Reina," said Lan Arandor primly.

"Reina," breathed Val again, enjoying the taste of the syllables. He nodded, still grinning. "She will do nicely. Oh, yes. I wouldn't mind —"

"Focus! We're left with two likely scenarios," snapped Lan. "Either she does not survive the Superdungeon, in which case none of this matters. Or she does—and she comes to inherit the mantle of the Temple of the World Tree, as is the right of her title…"

"She'll also need a Maker consort, won't she?" said Val. "Yes—of course! Young, inexperienced, naïve… she won't know what to do with such a large, unwieldy empire! Why she'll be overwhelmed, the poor thing. She'll need a most capable husband to guide her every

step."

He smirked. "You needn't worry, Father. In such matters, I have extensive experience. I'll sing a sweet little song to her and she'll be as good as mine. Our future is well secure."

Lan pursed his lips. "And here I always felt your… lascivious tendencies… were your worst weakness. Never could I imagine they might actually come in handy."

"It must be Fate," said Val.

"You'll turn her naivete into our opportunity," said Lan. "Should she make it out alive… I'll entrust this matter to you."

"She won't know what struck her," Val promised.

"There is, however, just one problem." And here Lan's face turned dark again. "She's rather fond of one of her traveling companions at the moment—"

"A childish infatuation, I'm sure," snorted Val. "It means very little, in my experience, once I enter the picture…"

He turned eager. "Luthor! Tap the live feeds. Show me my future wife."

"About that," said Lan quickly. "Perhaps now is not the best time —"

"Show me!" commanded Val.

"Yes, my prince," said Luthor.

And a new scene faded into view. They were all treated to the picture of Reina with her hands on Zane's sweaty bare back.

Val's face went black. "…Who is that?"

"The traveling companion in question," said Lan flatly.

Zane seemed to finish breaking through just then—his eyes came open. He looked back, exchanged a few words with Reina. Then they started making out passionately.

Lan watched stone-faced. Val gaped, quite white. Luthor stood there shuffling awkwardly.

"What in the Nine Hells," snarled Val. "Is he doing with my future wife?!"

"That is Zane Walker," said Lan. "The current #1 pick in this year's Integration draft—"

"#1?!" choked Val. "What could he possibly have done to warrant it?!"

"Do not underestimate him!" said Lan, eyes flashing. "He may be a native, and seem foolish, at times—" As though on cue, Zane looked around, scratching his head, like he smelled something funny. Then promptly went back to kissing Reina. "But he is extremely dangerous. And talented."

"Him? He looks like the king of the cave-men!"

"He's already on his second Concept," said Lan. "He's broken

through to Core—and not just any core. A high-peak Core, we believe… perhaps even higher! In the scarce few years he's had, well under a decade, by our scouts' best estimates!"

That stopped Val in his tracks. That… happened to be faster than Val himself.

Suddenly the Prince of Flowers felt a niggling of doubt. Which only made him more incensed.

"Wait until I get my hands on him," he breathed. "I'll butcher him where he stands! She'll forget this little—this little fling—soon enough…"

He trailed off weakly.

By now the two of them had broken apart, gasping, breathing heavily. Reina's warm brown eyes were staring at Zane like he was the only person in the world.

Val's face was going from white to red, very fast.

"He cannot be allowed to live," Lan agreed. "The Mistress is far too attached to him. It will not do."

"I've got half a mind to portal down there," said Val, red-faced. "And take him on man-to-man! I'll strip off his skin, I'll cut him in a dozen pieces, leave him wriggling like a stranded trout—we'll see how much she likes him then!"

Lan wrinkled his nose.

"Control yourself," snapped Lan. "You won't get that chance anytime soon. Say he makes it out of the dungeon, what then? Would you assassinate the top candidate in the integration in broad daylight? In direct violation of the system's grace period? Have you lost your mind?!"

He bellowed that last bit. His aura flared.

For a moment Val looked surly. But he quailed in the end.

"As soon as the grace period ends, then," Val muttered. "I'll challenge him to an honor duel. And end him then!"

"What is smarter, and vastly preferable," said Lan. "Is if we can orchestrate a way for him to die in the Superdungeon itself. Without the world knowing of our involvement."

Lan frowned. "Ideally the Superdungeon will do it for us. And there's still a good chance of it, given how low he's been dropped… but that is not enough of a guarantee. Thus far he's made it through everything it's thrown at him. Granted, it's early yet…"

Lan paused. "Our best scrying shows his journey will grow much more difficult. Especially in these next sections, when the Monsters send forth their true strength. Still—with the strides he's made lately… the odds are fifty-fifty that he'll survive the first floor."

"That," said Val, gritting his teeth. "Is not good enough!"

"Patience. He's still got three more floors to go—each harder than

the last! And we have many ways to make his route significantly harder, if not totally impossible. Especially once we're allowed to drop tributes…"

Lan shook his head. "Leave him to me. In a moon's time, Zane Walker will be but a painful memory in her mind. All you must do is be ready to receive the heartbroken Mistress as she looks for someone to comfort her."

"…Fine," growled Val. "If you don't finish the job, though, Father—mark my words. I will!"

***

After their Leveling finished, Reina was in the Level 230s. Her Bloodline Manifestation came through too. A phantom wooden nymph with the crown of flowers rising over her head, arms spread, emerald-green eyes shining. Her regeneration buff had gotten another big evolution. When she hit Zane with it, it felt like he was floating, lifted in soul and body. A subtle green glow rose off his skin… he felt flushed with her warmth—he felt super-charged with health, with essence. It even extended to his soul.

She also unlocked a new Skill upgrade—'Sylvan Aegis.' She could now summon shields of roots and vines to protect herself. They were pretty strong—they could batter away most Core attacks. She could take care of herself, she told Zane, looking all determined. She wanted him to focus on doing what he did best. He nodded.

Evan was excited—even more so than usual—with his gains too. He got a new power stack. The Power of Friendship, which was at an all-time power high, plus the Power of Determination, plus his new Bloodline Skill.

It folded into a Clear Beam Slash and drew upon his Laws of Lasers too. It was called the 'Fang of the Raijuu'—and when he threw it, a baby thunder lion roared over his head.

He charged it for a few seconds, locking onto his target as he did. He started quivering, glowing, drawing all his peak core powers into it. Then… "Hyaaaa!" Evan cried.

A sniper rifle of a beam, pure-white, blistering laws of Lightning and Light—ripped through the air. Gored clean through the center of a distant skyscraper some dozen miles off. When Zane blinked the light out of his eyes, he saw a big gaping smoking hole.

Evan beamed. His power output had gotten a lot stronger, he felt, and Zane agreed. That would do some serious damage. It was worthy of many head-pats.

Evan said while he was charging he was locking in the strike, so he could keep tracking his targets even if they moved. He could make little shots as well as big ones. No bird would be safe.

As for Avery—she was in the Level 220s now, and she said as long

as the thing had a soul, she was pretty darn sure she could mess with it. When she squinted her eyes and a white fox glowed over her head. Her perception could pierce even the blocked parts of the mini-map. Extending far into the horizon.

She was pretty happy about it. She had been hoping she would also get a Skill which could spontaneously explode people's heads or something, but this would do.

Her new Skill would come in handy very soon. The next section would require keen eyes.

***

You have entered: Section 2-3
The Great Lake

They walked past the last of the lava-flows. After that a wall of coiling mists loomed ahead of them. Blanketing everything, floor to stalagmite-studded ceiling. Giving in some places, extending in others, but impenetrable everywhere.

Avery checked it out a bit—according to her it was all just one big lake behind that mist. Right in the middle of the Dwarven Realm.

She stretched her perception as far as she could. As far as she could tell it went on and on. More like an ocean, maybe. She thought there were more abandoned cities on the east and the west banks of it, but the compass was pointing them straight north. Right through the center.

It was deep, boggy, and foggy—and as they got close Zane saw the turgid waters were perfectly still.

Zane could swear he saw some giant shadows looming in the fog earlier. Maybe he was just confused. A couple steps closer, though, and he felt a soft cold wet-blanket sensation on his soul. Gently, just a touch in the astral plane. It vanished as quick as it came.

Hmm.

Avery frowned. "Yeah," she said. "There's definitely stuff in there."

If Zane squinted hard, he swore he saw more shadows in the fog. Coiling over the water, serpent-like.

And now that they'd got near the banks you could hear voices whispering in the fog, like they were sharing secrets just out of hearing…

Avery said she would let them know if anything got too close, though even she looked a little unsure what was in there. The water was quite gunky.

***

They came to the banks and saw all the ways the dwarves had tried to conquer the lake. There were stone docks and piers scattered all along the bank, big flat blocks jutting deep into the gunk. Spirit Steel

winches all over. A few chunky steam-ships were scattered by the docks, half-sunken, useless.

There were some watchtowers built up by the shore too—mostly listing on their sides, sagging into the bog. If you kept walking about half a mile right, you could see a once-mighty dam stretching in a loose semicircle. It was punctured, though. Thick streams of water slogged gently through.

Most of the place had rusted over, or been taken over by mosses and barnacles.

Zane saw broken-up chunks of wall too—spread far apart, but they must've linked together once. The parts that survived were dozens of feet tall, and just about as thick. Old rune etchings ran up their sides, meant to keep them sturdy. He wondered what they were guarding against.

Anyway. They were mostly useless now. But as he and his friends passed, Zane would stop occasionally, dig out the highest grade chunk of whatever steel they came across, and eat it. This led to quite a bit of snacking as they tried to find a way forward. He got pretty close to a Level in his Bones—not quite, though. Earth - Mythic Skills took a lot to Level.

They ambled along the shore for a bit. Reina considered resurrecting one of those boats with a Skill. Maybe try sailing them across.

"Wait!" cried Avery. "Over there!"

She pointed, and they went. It turned out there were a fleet of steel bridges striking deep into the lake. Mostly intact. They spanned a few islands in-between, but they would get them to the far shore.

There, miles and miles away, Avery could just make out the outlines of a castle. The final section where the staircase to the next floor lay: the Throne Room.

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223. The Lake District (III)

To get to the final section—and to the second floor after that—they first needed to get past the Lake. And all the mists swirling all over it.

It went maybe a few dozen miles, Avery concluded, after squinting at it and running around a bit and squinting some more. A clutch of bridges linked one end to another, with a fat leafy island in the middle. Pretty simple.

The bridges themselves were almost unreasonably thick. Good quality spirit steel. Little rust to them—though there were chunks broken off in the middle, melted off or blasted off, it looked like. The parts that lasted though still looked sturdy enough.

Zane took a step, inspecting it. It held his weight well enough, without protesting. That was not a small amount.

He figured it would do.

They went on ahead.

***

Evergreen Grove
Temple of the World Tree

A little war room was in session.

High Priest Lan Arandor watched all of this unfolding. A projection thrown up in the middle of the grove. Black lines marred his temple.

“You needn't worry, Your Holiness,” said Scout Teal, a smiling bespectacled half-elf. “We may well be about to witness the end of Zane Walker! He hasn’t got a clue what he’s walking into.”

“Tell me,” said Lan. “What am I seeing?”

“That isn't just any Lake, your Holiness,” said the Scout. He cleared his throat. “At the peak of the last Chaos Cycle, a vicious Monster outbreak occurred right here. Hordes of carcasses buried at the Lake’s bottom stitched together, reanimated by a wellspring of savage Yin essence! They snuffed out the Dwarven Navy in a matter of hours—thousands of Core warriors. In a blink!”

The scout nodded confidently. “Zane Walker has just stepped foot into a killing field. And not just any killing field. Through extensive scrying, we’ve ascertained that the Monsters of this region primarily target the soul.”

“I see,” said Lan Arandor slowly. “But he’s got a rather large soul, hasn’t he?”

“Only if he can make use of it. Otherwise it’s even worse—a big

soul makes for a big target," said the scout. His smile widened even more. "He'll be a walking beacon in there! And his greatest weapon won't help him…"

"His body," intoned Lan. "Right."

"It *is* very impressive, as we've seen. He has imbibed the S-tier Godbeast Bloodline 'Titan Rhino,' and from all we've reviewed he's gotten it up to Bone Tempering. He's stuffed it with so much steel his muscles alone could approach a Sky-grade treasure!" said Teal. "Attacking that directly will be difficult… but his soul is another matter. We've reviewed every recording battle we could get our hands on up until mere days ago. Every soul attack we could find, he's had to take head-on—he's relied on his girth so far…"

Teal chuckled. "That false sense of security will doom him in the end, I predict! The big trees make the loudest falls."

"Hmm," said Lan, stroking his chin. "Promising."

"It isn't that impressive," said Val, off to the side.

"Pardon?" said Teal.

"His body," Val muttered. "It isn't that impressive."

Lan frowned at his son for a second. Then—

"By the Earth Mother—what is it I always tell you? It won't do to underestimate the enemy! To defeat them you must assess them precisely as they are. Put aside your ego. The man's a physical specimen—just look at him!"

At that moment Zane was struggling to fit through the gate to get onto the bridge. It was only wide enough to fit a dwarven truck. He frowned at it, shrugged, and inched on through sideways.

"It's no good pretending otherwise. Such hubris will only come back to bite you!"

"Tch!" Val darkened, turned away.

Lan grimaced. His son was overflowing with talent, it was true. His cultivation soared while he barely tried, and he could outduel most any of the other Chosen, hardly practicing—but the Heavens did not give his son sense in equal measure. Val still had an adolescent's maturity. The lustiness and pettiness of youth. He acted positively moody at times. It gave Lan headaches.

There were times when Lan wished he had taken a harder hand with the boy, but he took after his mother so, and Lan couldn't bear it. And here they were.

"If it's any consolation, my prince," said the scout. "I strongly suspect he won't last the hour!"

"I'll enjoy this," said Val, gnashing his teeth. His dainty eyelashes fluttered in rage.

***

Zane and crew started their way across. It smelled of damp earth

and musty stone. Here and there the water rippled, exposing boat-sized air bubbles that popped up, burst crisply, sloshed back in—as though breathed by some enormous beast hidden deep below the surface…

His friends shivered a little, came closer instinctively, and felt warmer for it. It was warmer next to Zane, like he was giving off some kind of body heat. He was confused at first. He didn't feel much difference.

Then the Monsters came.

The first Monster flickered out in front of them—he saw it first as a patch of weird air, warbling the Astral Plane. He frowned at it. Weird.

Avery was thinking the same. "What the.. "

Then it attacked.

It flickered out of nothing. A billowing black cloak swishing into being, ten-foot-tall, tattered, riding on some invisible harsh gale. A patch of faceless dark with a gaping void of a mouth. Its arms were gnarled, little more than eroded bones, as though plucked from long-dead creatures. Zane felt it then—a wintry-cold presence gushing from it, frosting the air…

A second flickered out to the left. A third behind it, a fourth swarming in on him—

Fog Wraith (Monster)
Level 260

They all felt quite strange to Zane. Like they were barely there, weakly anchored to the physical world. He did feel them pretty strongly in the Astral Plane. These things were mostly essence and Law, held together by soul… they were like some of the things that had attacked him in the Red Moon Pagoda, he felt.

Their presences trailed crackling voids in the Astral Plane. He felt how it affected his friends—even just being near them made them feel involuntary spikes of fear, of hopelessness…

Then the air began to bend in front of them. Twisting, falling in—those gaping maws dropped open. And screamed.

Out raged a blistering soul attack. Four tornados of pure sucking force ripping through the air linking to one big vacuum—

Reina gasped. Threw up a shield—it passed right through. And hit Zane right in the face.

It was enough power to rip souls straight out of bodies. Even souls like Zane's would've had some trouble, he thought.

Only… Zane had dealt with this kind of stuff before. Pretty recently. It was why he hadn't really been concerned when he saw these things pop up.

It felt like those attacks in the Red Moon Pagoda too—just not

nearly as strong. It kind of tickled, actually.

Zane frowned at them.

Then his eyes began to glow crimson.

A red glow rose off his skin… and the image of a Red Moon blew out of him.

And a new power rocked the Astral Plane.

Swallowing up that chunk of bridge, lighting up the fog in that bloody-bright hue—eclipsing the Wraiths in the glow of it, the sheer scale of it. A celestial power rising in the middle of the lake…

The Red Moon Pagoda took Zane's soul. His aura. And projected it like rays off the sun.

…There was a lot to project.

The Fog Wraiths choked right off. At first they were just baffled—for a moment those hollow mouths hung open. Then they turned away, hissing, like it hurt just to look at him. And then they started to shiver, and whimper, stood frozen there—like they couldn't even bear to move.

He had been wondering when that Pagoda would come in handy, actually.

They really were mostly just energy in the Astral Plane. Zane considered them. Could he just…?

He reached out with his soul—with Emperor's Will. Grabbed hold of one, by its head. The other, by the end of it. And twisted that tattered cloak like he was drying a towel.

It shrieked as it came apart. And dissolved, smoked away in his grip.

Skill evolved!
Emperor's Soul Uncommon III -> Epic I

Huh. He blinked. That was easy.

He promptly scooped up the rest of them, and squished them one by one.

He looked back around at his friends—everyone seemed fine, if a bit frazzled.

They ambled on.

***

Evergreen Grove
Temple of the World Tree

Silence.

A little twitching. In Lan Arandor's face.

Then—"You said that was supposed to end him!" said Val.

"What was that?" snarled Lan. He rounded on his scout, face tinged red.

“Err,” blubbered scout Teal, face all white. “Ah. That…”

“That was the Red Moon Pagoda!”

“It… appears so, Your Holiness—”

“How the hell could you not have known that Zane Walker had the damned Red Moon Pagoda?! Is my Scouting Department composed of blind men?!”

“Err—”

“And how could he possibly have mastered it to that degree?! That shield could stop a Nascent Soul attack!”

“I… he never showed that capacity—”

Lan looked like he wanted to fume more. But in the end he just gritted his teeth, and took a deep breath, and pinched the bridge of his nose. At last he spoke.

“No. This… is not necessarily your fault. Every time we see Zane Walker he manages to surprise us. This is a man of endless depth,” said Lan. His eyes narrowed even further, almost to slits. “We must be prepared for anything he can muster. It is no wonder he’s ranked first! This man is ready for any occasion.”

Meanwhile on the projection, Zane tripped over an exposed plank, flailed for a bit, caught his balance, frowned at the plank, shrugged, and kept walking.

“To master the Pagoda to that degree—his soul has to be even bigger than we thought,” continued Lan. He looked as if he was running calculations in his head. “Heavens! Everything about him must be massive…”

This thought did not sit well with Val, who was looking at Reina walking happily next to Zane. His face went a little queasy.

“No—this is a good thing,” said Lan slowly. “Every encounter tells us something new! Soon we will know the full scope of the enemy. Then we can plan accordingly.”

Lan narrowed his eyes. “So that when the time comes to bring down the elephant, we must make certain we use a spear of sufficient size.”

“Your Holiness,” gasped the scout, trying to recover. “If I may—I grant you, that was a shock. But those Monsters were merely an appetizer! The worst is yet to come… he’s not out of the woods yet, not by far!”

***

Zane liked this section. It was a lot more pleasant than the last one.

At first a few big ghost-clusters came up to bother them. But after he squeezed a few of them dry, most of them ran screaming. Now almost none of them dared attack him anymore. It made for a good breather. They walked on ambling.

In the meantime—

Level up!
246 -> 247

He was making good progress there. Getting closer and closer to Level 250.

They came across some shipwrecks along the way—a surprising amount littered around the edges of the bridge. He took little detours to explore them. Mostly they had steam engines, no sails. When he broke inside of them, though, ripped some big latches off some old vaults, he found good caches of precious metal lying around.

It made for a lot of easy munching for Zane.

Skill up!
Bastion Bone II -> III

***

Soon they were coming up to the island in the middle of the Lake. They saw it up ahead hazed in mist.

Instantly Zane could tell it was different from the rest of the place. The sheer aura pouring off it… they heard a deep groaning thumping. In the distance, past outlines of skeletal white trees, lurked giant lumbering shadows. And even farther—looming over it all—a coiling shadow heaving over the trees…

Its aura rose over everything else too. It was a familiar kind of aura—one that made Zane frown. He had only felt that kind of aura once before.

Then he saw the dots. A few fat red ones on the beaches—and more, deeper in. Each was a lot fatter than usual. That usually meant Bosses, and a lot of them.

“Incoming!” cried Avery.

And the waters all around them began frosting over.

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224. Misty Isle (I)

The world erupted in frost. Thick patches of it raced across the waters, crackled across the air, gathering on nothing. Fat air bubbles rumbled up from below.

A Monster erupted. Broke the surface, howling a ghastly battle cry.

It was what Zane had seen earlier. A long coiling shape. A chunky serpent body with a wormlike head. It seethed clouds of frost. And as it towered over them, rising farther and farther, it dripped a smoking white slime all over the decks, a ghostly ectoplasm…

Cold billowed out from it in a rush. It shrieked again, a sound to shatter glass. And a wave of Law crushed over them. Ice and Darkness intertwined.

Ghoul Eel (Monster)
Essence Level 268

Zane blinked at it. And it blasted him.

A dirty blizzard crashed over him.

His eyes went red.

A red moon flared all through him. Rising to meet the blow.

This time he felt it. It didn't hurt him much but he had to stagger a step, grunting, had to work a little to throw it off. This thing knew how to put its heft behind its shots.

As the beast wound back around for another go, he could tell this one wouldn't just shrivel up like those wraiths. It was much more grounded in the world. And he could feel a stronger aura rippling out from it too—it was quite distinctive. Something like a Godbeast's. But not quite as thick—strands of power, diluted, an echo of that majesty…

As the Ghoul Eel swayed there, massive body unfurling, ice crackled the air all around it, creeping over the waters, over the bridge, hissing and steaming…

Zane narrowed his eyes.

"Get back," he said to his friends. "I'll take care of this."

They were already doing it. They could tell there would be a blast radius.

It came for him again—and this time it wanted to take a chunk of him with it. He stepped back and braced. His broad hands flew up to greet it.

It hissed once more, fangs bared, Bloodline burning, its freezer of a

mouth leaking a smoke stack of winter wind—and lunged.

Zane roared. And caught it right at the moment of impact.

He skidded, gritting his teeth, felt the force ringing out over his flesh, his bone, skin—*CLANG!*

Essence blasted all over him, ice plumes billowing. As the giant Monster put all its weight into ending him—

He gave a final grunt. And came to a halt a dozen feet back, heels smoking.

He'd caught the beast right by the tip of its teeth—those great curving fangs. Its mouth was splayed wide open. It tried to ram its mouth closed, hulking muscles down the side of its huge face working furiously. But Zane held it there, eyes narrowed.

His hands were hissing. Burning with his own essence—burning against the bracing cold. Bracing cold and searing hot met right at the line of his skin. And more, too, two huge opposing forces, crushing and widening, coming together, the whispers of a cold Godbeast, and the beating heart of a hot one crashing against each other—it was a lot to take all at once.

His body was more than up to it.

His skin hardly scratched at all. He hardly felt it in his bones either. His muscles showed no bruises. He was smoking a little. But his body held stubborn strong.

There was no tremble to his fists. All the tremble came from that Eel, working all its strength against him, thrashing and hissing—Zane's fists were iron steady.

He took a deep breath. Flexed. And opened his arms wide.

He burned a little of his Bloodline. Just to stoke the fire. Felt cords of thick muscle down his big back lighting up all at once. Engaging with vicious intent.

The beast's eyes popped. Its whole head began to shake quite violently—this time not of its own will. There was an enormous ripping sound, the webbing of its mouth, then its scales coming apart, faster and faster, then a shrieking—and blood fountained the air.

As Zane tore those two huge fangs clean out of its mouth.

He bellowed. Leaped. Whirled—and slammed down his fists. And one giant icicle of a fang impaled its owner—right through its bulbous eye. The Eel's head rammed down, shaking the bridge, and stayed there. Nailed deep into the metal.

He landed right on top of the thing, fists clenched, watching the blood shower into the sea. Panting.

That thing made him work a little.

He smiled down at his hands. Dark blood. None of it was his.

It was nice to see his body finally tested. He had been wondering what it could do now. Only… that was still nowhere near his limit.

That thing had not even forced him to use his weapon.

He wondered how much more he could do. He would soon see. He turned his eyes to the island. And clenched his fists.

***

"What was that you said? He's 'not out of the woods'?!" hissed Lan Arandor, spittle flying from his white lips.

"Err—" squeaked Scout Teal.

"I'm starting to think nothing in this whole damned floor will pose him a challenge!"

"I wouldn't be so hasty, your Holiness!" said Scout Teal, cringing. "Our scrying abilities ended right at this island—but they did reveal to us inordinately strong power signatures, powers that should not be on this floor—powers sent just for Zane Walker! We believe the Monsters have prepared a nasty surprise for him… if anything on this floor'll kill him, if not in the final hall, it'll be right here. On this very island!"

Lan just narrowed his eyes at the scout, who looked like he wanted to shrink into his deer hide boots. At last he snorted.

"Fine," he snapped. "But thus far your intelligence has proven remarkably unintelligent, Scout Teal. Should you fail me again I might question whether you're worth your place in our World Tree. You know my distaste for rot."

The Scout shivered.

A pause.

"Wait," said Val slowly. The Prince still sounded rather shrill—he had been brooding in a corner all this time, thinking. "How many times has that brute Leveled since he got to this floor? Three? Four?!"

"Err—"

"Teal! What's his Leveling talent?" Val demanded.

The Scout paused. He looked a little uncertain. He looked like he might say so. Then he looked at Lan's face, and back at Val's, and spluttered quickly—"I believe—A8, perhaps A9, my prince! Yes, yes it must be!"

Val was going even redder in the face than he already was. "That's as good as mine!"

"Don't panic," said Lan sharply. "It's unbecoming of you. He'll never catch you. You take Sky-grade Golden Apples daily and sip on Spring waters collected from Mt. Tai itself! He hasn't got a thousandth your resources."

"You don't know that!" snarled Val. He was trembling a little, breathing fast. "That… that bastard—he's already got my woman…"

He choked, pushed through. "What if he breaks my Leveling record? Or—or worse—what if he comes here with her? What if he decides *he* wants to be Maker Consort instead of me? He could swipe that from me too!"

Lan had never seen his son so agitated. His voice was reaching girlish registers. Then again… usually he destroyed his peers, the Chosen of the other Great Families, without hardly trying. This might be the first time he felt truly threatened.

Truth be told, though Val was among the cream of the crop in his generation of the World Tree Faction's Outer Chosen, Lan still felt it was a shame. With Lan's enormous resources and Val's enormous talent—if the boy simply applied himself, he could become a true rising star of this era. Truly formidable.

He simply lacked the motivation all this time…

Lan paused. Cocked his head.

"Well," he said slowly. "That's certainly a fair possibility. After all, Zane Walker's got a powerful soul. Much more so than yours—and it seems he's quickly erasing the one great advantage you have."

Lan shrugged. "Then again, how could he not? Look at how he trains! The man's a demon—fighting hard day and night… with how things are going it's only a matter of time until he catches you, I'm afraid."

"In Leveling, perhaps!" cried Val. "But that's hardly my only advantage—I could outduel him in my sleep!"

"If he catches you in Level, with his Bloodline? It'd be close."

"In Law then—I still beat him there!"

"Not for long, with how strong Zane's soul is."

By now Val was huffing, full-flush. "Well… well—there's still one area that brute could never match me! The duties of a Consort involve being the Mistress' lover, too—in that there's no-one more worthy!"

And he puffed himself up like a peacock. Lan almost rolled his eyes. This was truly desperate from Val. But here Lan had a retort too.

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Lan. "I'm told Zane's not only a very talented duelist. He may be even more proficient in matters of dual cultivation. That has contributed to a significant portion of his Levels, I'm told—in that art he could be as high as Earth - Mythic."

"Mythic?!" choked Val.

He looked like he could hardly take it anymore. He was going from deep red to bright purple.

"Tell him," Lan prompted.

Scout Teal coughed delicately, looking quite awkward. "Well… it's hard to ascertain Zane's exact Skill level—but from what our scrying can gather, it's common knowledge in his Faction that the Mistress is… exceedingly vocal in her approval… why, the grade of the noise wards—"

"AGHHHHH!" cried Val. He started clutching at his head like he might tear out his hair at the roots—he jerked up, treated his father to a wide-eyed, red-rimmed stare—

“Father—you must kill him! You’ve got to!”

“I will certainly give it my best effort,” said Lan, shrugging. “But for such a capable man—who knows? There's every chance he may survive. Then nothing can stop him from claiming the position of Maker Consort. Except you, I suppose, should you wish to challenge him—though at the rate he’s growing…”

“I can’t take this,” cried Val. “I won’t be made to just sit here!”

He started storming out.

“Where are you going?” Lan called after him.

“Cultivation!” screamed Val. “Gather all my treasures, all the best ones, the Golden Apples, the Sky-Ranked Vials of Essence—I am not to be disturbed!”

Lan gave a secret smile as he watched his son storm out.

He almost didn't even want Zane Walker to die anymore, he was proving such a useful tool.

Almost.

His eyes flashed cold again.

He turned back to the projection and laced his spindly fingers.

***

The mists all over the Great Lake seemed to be emanating from that one misty island, Reina realized. They flowed off in all directions. It lay smack dab in the middle.

The sheer aura coming off the place was breathtaking.

They were nearing the shores—just a hundred or so paces off—when.

You have entered:
Boss Lair: Misty Isle
Lair lock!
Objectives:
Kill Xanthos, the Fallen Blizzard Hydra
Kill Vermes, Shaman of the North Wind
Objectives Complete (0/2)

Translucent blue dungeon wards flared behind them. Cutting off the path back.

Reina whirled around at them, eyes wide. She thought they weren't supposed to be here—this place wasn’t meant to be structured like a dungeon, with typical Boss Lairs… it was meant to be a realm. Something wasn’t quite right, she felt.

She and Zane looked at each other.

One way or another, there was only one way forward, Zane figured.

They soldiered on.

In the distance, rising over the trees, was that strange serpent-like shadow. Big as a skyscraper—it hadn't moved in all their time here.

Now that they got close, they could see it was slowly bulging, compressing, and they heard a soft distant rumbling—as though it was some huge Monster sleeping…

They got a dozen paces closer, and the mists unfurled a little over the top. And they got a clearer glimpse of the beast. Just a little chunk of it. At first, it looked like a cracked glacier, a bare sheet of fissured ice. Then Zane realized those were scales.

Xanthos, Fallen Blizzard Hydra (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 288

Reina stiffened at the title.

The whole Isle lay in its shadow—and Zane could tell just from feeling its aura, all the way out here, that it stood apart from all the rest. He'd felt the same thing from the Minotaur. It was like seeing an hourglass on a spider or yellow-black on a snake. It triggered some danger sense deep in him.

That only got his heart pumping a little faster.

He remembered the weird weapon the Minotaur had wielded. That 'weapon soul,' and how advanced its Bloodline was…

Only Xanthos's aura made the Minotaur's seem bug-like in contrast.

Zane got a whiff of the Blizzard Hydra's Bloodline too. It felt much like the Eel's—just orders of magnitude denser.

They weren't anywhere close to it. It seemed pretty deep in the island, behind a range of icy mountains. And all that fighting they'd done hadn't woken it, apparently. It didn't seem anywhere close to stirring. Just yet.

They would come in contact with it eventually. That was clear enough.

Reina had one more troubling thought. That Shaman… it was listed right next to the Hydra. Could that also be a Monster Knight?

They had entered strange new territory.

They had to cross half the Island just to get to that thing. And it was hardly the only aura there. He felt a thick haze of Monstrous aura seeping all over the place, tainting the air....

If he was looking for a test, he'd found it. He was just three Levels from 250, too.

The Misty Isle could be just the thing he needed.

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225. Misty Isle (II)

They got within a few dozen feet of the beach when Avery let out a yelp.

"Hey wait!" She ran up, grabbed the back of Zane's shirt, tried to drag him to a halt, heaving with all her strength.

Zane did not feel this. He took another step. She yelped again and face-planted.

"Oww…"

He stopped, blinked back at her as she sat there, rubbing her hoodie, looking a little miffed. Then she was all serious again.

"There's stuff in that fog," she said, nodding. "It's hiding them from the mini-map—Monsters. A whole bunch of 'em!"

Zane frowned into the mist. It was still too thick to make anything out.

"One sec—let me cloak us first," said Avery. "Then we'll get a closer look…"

Zane felt a shimmering touch wash over him. First in the physical realm, then the astral.

Cautiously they crept closer. The mists started shifting, lifting as they neared. And sure enough. Red dots started popping up.

Fat red dots scattered all over the beach like some sickness infesting the biome. They got a little farther in. Past the thick of the mists. And Zane saw them.

First, smack-dab in the middle—

Frost Drake (Monster)
Essence Level 270

A clutch of creatures that looked like Komodo Dragons sculpted of rotting ice—each as big as a Mack truck. Black tongues flickered out of their mouths, leaking clouds of some Ice-Poison Law with each breath. Melting the sands even as it froze them…

And to the right even closer, stalking around on all fours—

Great Zombie Ape (Monster)
Essence Level 272

They looked like Apes blown up a few sizes too big. Their skin was rotted, smoking with frost, as if just taken out of some cryogenic freezer. You could see their bones underneath—like icicles welded together. Poking out of their skin, making shiny icy exoskeletons

dense with Law. Fangs poking out between caterpillar lips. Their eyes shone icy blue too. One solid color.

There was a whole tribe of them. It had to be over a dozen. They had to be the main threat.

Then, up above, making low circles in the air—

Terrordactyl (Monster)
Essence Level 270

Pterodactyls stitched of the same haunted icy-blue hue. Their tattered tarps for wings beat slowly as they drifted, shedding dirty snowfalls. The air shivered around their mouths as they breathed, distorting…

It was a scene out of some twisted prehistoric era. Frozen giant dinosaur-things. Panting, snorting, waiting on this lonely Misty Isle.

Reina looked at him in vague alarm, beckoned him back. They retreated into the safety of the mists.

They needed a plan.

***

Reina came up with a solid one.

She wanted to do it in pieces—there were a lot of those Monsters out there. She wanted to bait them out, lead them on a big chase, then pick them off one by one. But Zane could tell she wasn't very confident in it. Even though she was pretending to be. He didn't even need Sage Mind—he knew that wide-eyed look of hers.

This was too tricky. Too much could go wrong.

Zane knew there was a cleaner way. A better way. They could wreck them all in one big go.

Reina sometimes purposefully discarded some of the best plans, he noticed. It was for his sake. If she could get away with it, she'd rather spare Zane—she got worried when a plan meant he'd take a lot of damage.

Zane found this rather cute.

He asked her to trust him.

He was sure of himself. He had tested his new strength against a few Monsters so far. None could make him feel threatened. They had barely scratched the surface of his new body—literally.

She hesitated for a bit. He saw the worry in her big warm brown eyes. But in the end she nodded, while biting her lip.

"Be careful," she said softly.

"I believe in you!" cried Evan.

"Yeah!" said Avery, tip-toeing to pat him on the back. "You got this big fella—go get 'em!"

***

Everyone went into battle mode.

Zane got his hammers out—and readied himself for some heavy-duty blasting. Reina buffed him up with regeneration beforehand, gave him a determined nod.

"Stay back," said Zane. He pounded his fists together. This could get messy.

They waded on in.

***

Avery scampered out first, throwing her hands at the skies.

A beat. Then a deep booming bellow, throaty, ferocious. A dragon's roar crashing over the beach, making all the Monsters jerk up—then the beast itself emerged.

Flames exploded from its brows, exploded from its mouth, exploded from its eyes even—one big black-and-red explosion.

The Terrordactyls started flapping angrily, started screeching at it, tried blasting the thing but it was too far out. It swerved and bobbed, returning fire. Until at last one of them caught it in the wing.

The dragon bellowed fresh, very red blood spewing out the wound—really quite a lot of it—wheeled around and bobbed away in a panic. The Terrordactyls shot right after in hot pursuit, blasting breaths at it, always just missing…

Now it was Zane's turn.

He strode on through. Reina was right behind him, pouring regeneration through him, warm waves of it coursing through every fiber of his being. His Bloodline began to burn. His hammers flared white-hot at his sides, burning away the mists…

And the Monsters saw him for the first time—the Frost Drakes, the Apes, blinking giant eyes wide at the sight of him. At the sheer breadth of aura crashing out of him.

Zane bellowed.

And struck first. Slammed his arms down in one mighty arc.

And his meteors crash-landed down upon the frozen beach. Crashed through dense sheets of ice, shattering them instantly—there was a massive cracking, a splintering, then a chorus of *BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!* Chain Explosions rattling all over, jumping the sands, and for a second it felt like the whole beach was listing on its side. Floored with searing blue light.

Furious roars, wounded roars, rang out under the din. Zane saw two or three huge shapes—Apes, going up in smoke—blown skyward, flailing huge fists.

Then the rest of them were on him.

The Zombie Apes came first—and fast. Bounding after him, snorting frosty fumes, each step rattling the ground. Evan gave a cry, sniped one straight in the eye, sent it careening, howling, clutching at its face. But that left ten of them crashing right over Zane, giant hammer-

fists falling, Ice and Steel coating their knuckles, made dense with heavy Law—

Zane narrowed his eyes right through the middle of the pack. Braced his legs deep into the ground. Sent his bloodline as hot as he could bring it, 'till it was coursing up and down his body, a mighty river…

Bring it!

And they did. They smashed right into him. One of them smashed a pillar of a fist straight into his face. Another rammed him in the guts. A third rattled his arms. He felt freezing rushes of ice gripping him everywhere they smashed, deadening all feeling even as all that force crashed through him—a fourth Ape smashed him through the belly, bending him over, a fifth all over his back, and then they were all over him, blanketing him, hanging all over him, bashing over and over—

A living ball of giant muscle writhing all over him, bashing at every bit of him it could find—

Steel and Ice drove the wind out of his lungs. He grunted at every punch. He felt his numbed muscles bruising, and the bones bruising beneath… these things hit even harder than those Wardens. By a lot.

Those Wardens had shattered him in seconds. But Zane was a new man.

If he had a hard head before, it was nigh indestructible now. They could make his ears ring. They could batter his body back and forth, make his head whiplash to the force of their fists—but they were not cracking him.

His Health was dropping fast—

But Zane's will, his focus, held firm. He gritted his bloody teeth. And kept yanking with all the power in his battered muscles—still burning through the freezing, through the bruising—

His counter was swerving right back around.

His hammers. Making long, wide arcs, gathering steam, and speed, and power—great missiles dropping, at last. Back home.

Right in the epicenter of that writhing bludgeoning mass.

It struck every Monster there. Dead-on. Caught them deep in the middle of the blast radius…

Zane bellowed. His Core flared as bright as it ever had—and he let loose. No reservations.

And his gamble paid off in brutal fashion.

BOOM!

There was no coldness around him anymore. Not with all that boiling essence rushing out of him, gone in an instant, blooming violently mid-air— a sphere of pure shining raging heat, Stormfire

reigning triumphant, whiting out the world, searing straight through ghostly flesh, ramming past those dense sheets of ice, raging through the vitals beneath—

Howls raked the air. Huge smoking beasts flew off him flailing, melting, burning…

These were powerful beasts. Sturdy. With thick exoskeletons. And the blast was spread out among the lot of them—he might've only gotten one. But he did manage to shatter six or seven of them pretty badly, make their skin, their bones, look like cracked vases.

They were furious. Wheeling back on him. But he was turning back too, swerving his hammers for a second go-round—

A giant fist crunched into his jaw, made him spit blood. Another battered his belly, and he felt the soft organs shatter there. He gritted his teeth, felt hot salty blood leaking through his split lips—

Warning!
Health under 75%

The whooping screeching Ape-mass tore into him.

Right up until his meteors touched down once more. Dead-on, again. And this time he finished the job.

Stormfire crashed right through those cracked exoskeletons, found their undead hearts—and erupted them.

Giant Ape-limbs went flying. Torn off of seared bodies. Their blood was permafrost-blue-white, burning up under a hotter, fiercer blue-white; Stormfire raging over everything…

Then there were only a handful of the beasts left. Picking themselves off the ground, heaving, broken.

Zane grinned. Licked his bloodied lips. Reina was already pumping him back up. He could feel her pride and hope swelling behind him, her relief—he was nearly over 75% again—

Then, a spike of fear.

"Look out!" she gasped.

And it hit him.

He hissed.

He hadn't even seen them at first—the beasts came at him from a side blinded with blood. Come crawling through the wreck, the mists. He hadn't clocked them in all that mess—

The Frost Drakes. They had converged on him. Mouths hung impossibly wide open. And they were blasting him with everything they had. Bloodlines were burning at full tilt.

These things shared a lineage with that Ghoul Eel—but some evolved form, much thicker, denser. A greater shard of the Blizzard Hydra's powers. And it made Zane feel like he was stuck naked in the dead of winter, frostbite creeping over his limbs… it wasn't the soul

that did it. It was the essence. It crept past his skin, sinking cold teeth into his muscles, a different kind of cold, the kind that froze things dead, that welded them forever together, a deep-freeze…

He felt his Health dipping fast. Living tissue deadening inside of him. Felt Reina straining, doing her best to push it back—it wasn't enough—

He snarled.

Zane's own Bloodline raged hot in his veins. Slowly pushing back the invasion. But it was five-on-one, and he had his hands full—it felt like five sets of thick heavy chains were lashing him down, making every little move a fierce effort. His joints felt weird, far too stiff—he groaned, tried to turn, tried to get at them, grimacing.

But then the Apes were coming for him again. And this time Zane was slow to recall his Chains. He could barely turn to face them in time. He was burning his muscles hotter and hotter—but they wouldn't thaw fast enough.

The shadows of giant fists loomed over him.

Shit.

Evan cried out. A gold flash sniped a beast right out of the air—then the rest were pounding into him again. Getting free cracks into his face, his belly, ringing, blinding him—he heard Reina's angry cry. He smacked one of the things off him, but another got him in the gut, right in a tender spot where many things had burst already. He felt a deep lurch of nausea, hunched over, involuntary, hacked out a pool of blood.

Warning!
Health under 50%
Savage Body Activated!
Strength increased 25%
Speed increased 25%
Vitality increased 25%

Zane forced himself back up. Turned. Found Evan, who was aiming frantically at the Ape behind him. Zane pointed instead at the Drakes' open mouths.

"*HRNGGGG*!" he grunted.

For a moment Evan looked baffled. Then—"Ohhh!"

At the last moment he changed course, sniped right through the Drake's maw. It choked, reeling, jaw snapping shut… and one set of icy chains snapped right off Zane. One arm yanked free.

And with it he smashed an Ape off him in a brilliant blast of Stormfire.

Another flash of gold—another cold chain snapping off him—and now Zane was back in the game. His Bloodline, Reina's efforts, were

taking over. Thawing him. His muscles were burning at peak, brighter than ever…

A line of hot blood trickled down his temple. He narrowed his eyes.

The last of the Apes were stumbling back at him. The Drakes were rallying too, closing in on all sides—at the same time he heard a screeching, saw Avery's wounded exhausted dragon simulacrum limping back, dragging the Terrordactyls along—

All converging on him.

It was time to finish things.

That was the thing about getting Zane under 50%, with his hammers in tow. He got to make use of one particular weapon.

He gave one last bedraggled roar, and threw hard and true. His hammers shot deep into the sky.

And hung there. Blazing to life. Shining so bright it hurt to look at —hurt just to be in the presence of it. Sunrise lighting up the underworld.

Zane brought it crashing down to earth.

That was the end of the dinosaurs.

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226. Misty Isle (III)

Everything whited out. Went to static. Raw energy swallowing physical, releasing their shapes…

Slowly colors filtered back. Sound trickled into the ruins…

Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 247 -> 249
Skill up!
Stormfire Smash III -> IV
Skill up!
Wish Upon A Star III -> IV

Zane stood there panting. Breathing in the smells of the crushed blackened world.

He smiled. Good.

He was still pretty pumped—but the Level-ups had healed him, body-wise. He had maybe half his essence in the tank. But he would get it back soon enough.

He was focused on his next Level. Just one away—that was when Reina thought it would happen. The next Class Evolution.

He turned to face her. She stood there gasping, hands on knees, all sweaty—her essence was nearly drained too. Zane had been careful to curve the blast around her. Now she smiled weakly up at him. Evan ran at him, tackled him in a hug. Avery scampered over and gave him a fist bump. “Alright!” she cheered.

But just when they were all starting to relax…

The cavern began to tremble.

And the ground shifted beneath their feet, uneasy, rocked on its axis—moved. By something else, some great weight shifting—and Zane felt a soul flare to life, a signal flare in the Astral Plane...

There came a cavernous gravelly roar. A roar that shivered the ice off the distant mountain-peaks.

And those giant Monstrous coils in the distance began to move.

Zane frowned.

There was a disturbance in the Astral Plane. A flex of raw power. Essence gushing into the world.

The mountains began to glow—the whole range. All at once. Not of their own volition. Something huge streamed through them, lighting them up from behind…. They started shaking violently, white cracks

ripping down their lengths—

"Get back!" Zane roared. Even as he dashed over, scooping up Avery, Evan, putting his body in front of Reina, managing to cover her too—he held them all tight, using his back as a shield. He was just big enough.

He was just in time too.

The mountain range blew.

Not like a volcano—like a hunk of dynamite. There was so much power running against them from the other side they gave out. In spectacular, violent fashion.

Smoking peaks flipped overhead, spinning like tops, trailing long tails of blocky ice—

He burned his Bloodline. Made sure his muscles held strong, his skin ran hot with essence—

Then an avalanche of force, of essence, of sheer heavy icy matter crushed right across his back.

Pain flared all over him.

It felt like they dropped a street's worth of skyscrapers all over him. Crumbling to pieces all around him, blasting into the sea…

He staggered. But held. Looked down at his friends, worried.

They all looked safe. Surprised, but unhurt.

He turned back around breathing heavy, felt cold smoke drifting off his back. Saw the raw chunks where the skin had been scraped off his sides, exposing chunks of bleeding muscle—but otherwise he found he was alright.

He looked back.

The Isle had been flattened out. Where there had been beach there was now snow. A vast plain of it. The mountains had been reduced to mere powdery mists blown away on the wind… they could have been standing on some Arctic ice sheet.

And the creatures on the other side, the creatures that had done this, were coming on through.

The first was a little bald purple-skinned old man with a thick white beard, cloaked in fluffy fur robes. Tiny fangs poked out the sides of his mouth. His eyes were mirthful crescents.

He floated on a little frosty cloud, a bubble of wintry wind that swirled wherever he moved, dropping drifting snowflakes…

He held a scepter at least as big as his body. A scepter crowned with a giant pearl. A Weapon Soul.

That aura…

Zane knew what it was. Identify confirmed it.

Vermes, Shaman of the North Wind (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 282

Behind him, coiling through the air, was a strange behemoth of a Monster. Its body could've been that of some world-striding centipede. Corkscrewing through the air. A herd of dragon's feet traipsed across low-hanging clouds. It seemed to take up half the sky. But where its head should be, four necks split off—making four massive ugly heads. The scales looked like sheets of cracked ice.

And they were all trained straight on Zane. The mists billowing out its nostrils made its own little cloud layer.

Xanthos, the Fallen Blizzard Hydra (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 288

Its Bloodline simmered within it. The final evolution of all Zane had just faced. The Ghoul Eels, the Drakes… now this.

Reina tensed as they floated on over.

The Shaman spread his arms wide. Grinning wide too.

Zane Walker, said the Shaman. He gave a wheezy cackle. **At last! We were wondering how long we'd have to wait…**

The Hydra's four heads each gave cloudy snorts.

I hope you enjoyed that little appetizer, said the Shaman. Those little fangs flashed wickedly in the dim light. **But now the real fight begins, I'm afraid…**

He raised his staff. And icicles the size of icebergs rose overhead, crackling into being, steaming with so much essence they cast warbling aurora lights on the ceilings high above, spilling out, coloring the snowy floors…

The Hydra growled. And its mouths started smoldering essence too.

Zane narrowed his eyes. And readied himself for battle too.

Summoning what remained of his powers. His body started smoking essence too, the pale image of a Titan Rhino flickering faint over his head…

Nothing more needed to be said.

He was half-exhausted. His Bloodline was half-burned—that did not matter.

He would fight until he got the job done.

You should be honored! said the Shaman, leering. **It is not often that a pre-Integration mortal requires the attention of two Monster Knights… but you've caught the eyes of forces locked deep within this prison, I'm afraid. Forces that are very unhappy that you yet live.**

By now Xanthos's breaths were gathering so much power they were starting up their own atmosphere.

It is time to remedy that.

Zane was trying to take the measure of both of them at once, trying to figure out how he could take both their strikes. He was already asking a lot of his body in such a short time.

The two of them at once…

This would be tricky.

He would do this, he told himself.

He would find a way.

You're a beefy one, aren't you? said the Shaman. **Perhaps you'll require… a little more to put down. Yes.**

He snapped his fingers. More giant icicles bloomed at his sides.

Any last words?

"You should never have come here," Zane growled. He swore he would make good on that.

The Shaman laughed.

At Zane's side, his friends weren't sitting still. They were powering up too, readying themselves for another pitched battle. Evan was trembling a little, he was so full of gold light. He was also rather scared. Avery had picked herself back up, put her game face back on. Reina was the worst off—she'd given almost everything into helping Zane. But she was gritting her teeth; she'd give it her all, he knew.

He would have to do his best to take the load off of them. He could shoulder this. He would.

It turned out Reina was thinking the same thing. He felt a spark of intent behind him, a spark of determination. She'd come up with a plan—she made a snap decision.

"Evan!" she cried. She was in commander mode. "Avery! To me!"

They started in surprise then scrambled over to her.

Eh? The Shaman seemed to notice her for the first time.

Then he hissed.

A golden laser slashed through the air—and nearly skewered them right through the face. An icy shield slashed up at the last moment blocking it—before exploding in tiny chunks.

The Shaman snarled. **How dare—**

Then he yelped. There was a Terrordactyl wheeling through the air, screeching at him, spitting a hissing sludge. The Shaman vanished in a puff of snow, came up a dozen feet away, returned fire, snarled, missed—

He tried taking aim at Reina and Avery and Evan, but Reina whispered in Evan's ear and cried, "Now!"

A gold beam ripped through the air—curving at the Shaman's blind spot. And he was forced to whirl around to block, grimacing—

Reina locked eyes with Zane. “We’ll hold him off for you,” she promised him. She looked all determined—he got her meaning instantly. By now they felt so close she didn’t even need to say anything. He knew her. He trusted her.

“Then I will kill the Hydra,” he promised her back. They nodded. And sprang into action.

***

He turned back to face his foe.

Just him now. His friends were leading the other Monster Knight farther and farther away, harassing it as best they could… he trusted them. He could not think on that now.

He needed his mind solely on destruction.

He and the Hydra faced each other across that flat icy expanse. A light snow drizzled between them. One of them was enormous, crowding out half the sky, so many heads, so many feet, an army unto itself. The other—one man. One block of flesh and muscle. Tiny in comparison. But blazing white-hot through every last fiber.

It was a strange thing though. In the Astral Plane their auras were just about matched. One hot. One cold. Both rising to the distant ceiling, blasting out at each other, charging fast… meeting in one stark invisible line, halfway between. And holding there.

The quality of Zane’s core, erasing a Forty Level difference.

But the physical presence of the beast was still overwhelming. It loomed over him, over everything, its shadows crisscrossing its own shadows, mouth seething with an absurd amount of Law, of essence dipping to temperatures humans would struggle to measure, much less understand…

Ghostly avatars rose over each of its heads. Its shining white eyes. A larger shadow of itself. Its Bloodline.

It felt like a Godbeast Bloodline—just corrupted. But no less strong.

Zane’s Titan Rhino Blood held up strong against it. Could still claim the advantage, drop-for-drop. But the amount of Bloodline… complicated things.

Zane still frowned at it. He had no clue where to even start with this thing. How best to hurt it. It was a Hydra… four heads…

Hmm.

He had to be careful here. He did not have the essence, the powers, to spare mistakes now.

They stood there still for a moment, each charging their powers to feverish heights...

Then the Monster opened its mouths.

And it felt like whole atmospheres dumped out at him. Blizzard on blizzard on blizzard.

Instantly Zane smashed the Stormfire Step. Tendons snapping

fierce. And he was gone—skidding so fast it broke the sound barrier, so fast he left streaking ghostly after-images—but those huge mouths were on him just as fast.

His tendons came in handy then—he had never realized just how fast he could change directions. He kept circling, eyes narrowed, sensing the intent of the beast. Trying to figure it out.

It was no easy thing. Four heads felt like four split intents and they kept crossing over each other—and he was barreling so fast, going so many ways—

He crossed right through the path of one of those breaths.

He bellowed.

For a second he felt like he'd been plunged into the depths of an icy river. The cold tried to grip all over him, tried dragging him under—but his own Bloodline went white hot, fighting it back, and he burned his way through. Forded his way through the other side with a beastly step, broke through to the air, kept barreling on….

He glanced down, gasping. Huge patches of his skin had gone black. The rot was creeping into the muscles underneath even as Stormfire wrestled with it, trying to burn it off… his organs felt very, very cold. For a second his blood had gone sluggish. He'd felt a shock of brain-freeze.

That had been just one stream. His Health had dipped ten percent—in seconds.

He could not let himself get caught in those. That was the thing about his body. Steel could burn very hard very fast—but it could cool that way too. His great strength was also his great weakness against this thing.

And still he couldn't seem to find its weakness.

He scrutinized its body as he sprinted, hoping to see a heart flare up red under its scales or its Core, a weakness he could smash—none sprung to mind.

The closest thing, his instincts and Skills told him, was those heads. That was the key. One of his first instincts had been to bash them in too. And yet…

He Identified it with Sage Mind.

Flickered through its Skills. Found what he was looking for.

Hydra's Rebirth (Passive) [Bloodline - Signature]

Destroy one of its heads, and another takes its place. Short of death this process cannot be stopped.

He had a feeling that would be the case. He had been hoping maybe he could burn the stump with Stormfire, stop it from coming back. No luck.

In the distance he felt a shockwave blast, heard Reina cry out.

Gritted his teeth.

His reserves were dimming. His Bloodline too. He was running out of time. He needed a plan, and fast—

He got caught in a blizzard stream again.

This time it got him head-on. Too clean. It blinded him. He had to fight like hell to get out of it, working his poisoned rotting muscles, straining his whole body just to break free—he stumbled body smoking. Eyes narrowed.

Warning!
Health under 75%

This time, he would not have Wish Upon a Star either…

His eyes flashed.

Maybe he would not need it.

To kill this beast he would have to attack the heads. Without destroying them.

It was time to bring new powers to an old-school idea. Back to where he'd begun.

He swapped out his Hammers.

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227. Fourth Evolution

His Chains dropped heavy to the ground. Bare. Stretching on and on behind him. His thick breaths fogged the air. His heart hammered hot in his chest.

It would have to be a sprint from start to finish. With how much he had left… he had just one go at this.

He burned the last of his Bloodline. The last of his essence. When he roared, a flickering gray Titan-Rhino roared with him. His body ran so hot he felt like it might melt at any moment—

He stomped. And dashed for all he was worth. Chains trailing behind him. Just kept slamming down footsteps, making a wide circle, looping the angry beast, bursting between blizzard streams—

It was inevitable that he would get caught. He knew it. He just gritted his teeth and took it, felt the cold tearing at him—it was like he'd stepped into a different less forgiving gravity. Freezing his muscles, his skin—it even gotten into the skull, cold fingers grasping at his thoughts, and he was falling.

A second stream was trained on him now too, dumping all over him —

He felt his Health dropping dangerously.

He bellowed. Choked on icy essence. Stomped, and stomped, and stomped like a stubborn bull—and at last barreled through. Feeling chilled all the way to the core of him.

His heart still pumped white-hot…

Warning!
Health under 50%
Savage Body Activated
Strength increased 25%
Speed increased 25%
Vitality increased 25%

He just kept going, making the beast turn, making it follow him. He didn't do anything different. Nothing that might arouse its suspicions. Just dropping his Chains behind, link after link, as he threw himself forward with a desperate energy.

One turn. Two. A wide lasso, lapping over itself now… Zane was not a nimble man. He knew this. But he made up for it in raw speed. Each step left a crater, showered sheets of ice and snow; he was going so fast, so forcefully, every time he got hit it had to be by accident.

There was no aiming for him.

He made it three full turns before he crossed a blizzard stream again.

This time when he stumbled through the other side, he was soaked to the bone. Shivering involuntarily even as his heart did all it could, struggling to drive heat to the rest of his sluggish body… he was stumbling now.

But the trap had been set.

He let out a deep rattling breath.

And firmed fists around his Chains.

Time to finish things.

He wrenched them even as he ran, driving forward, roaring, calling every last drop of power inside him.

And his Chains exploded in Stormfire.

And he pulled out another old, trusty Skill. One of his very first. It had not failed him yet.

Prometheus Noose.

All those Chains began to constrict. Loop on loop on loop, closing in, crushing over the Hydra's long throats—making a vice grip…

A perfect conduit for Zane. At last he had somewhere to channel all his strength. And he did with a vengeance.

All four Hydra-heads looked down for a second, bewildered. Then began to hack as the Chains closed in. The beast tried thrashing it off, howling, and an enormous force hammered through. For a second Zane was wrenched off his feet.

When he crash-landed though he dug in. Gritted his teeth, and put all his trembling, shivering, exhausted body—every last muscle that still listened—into the life-and-death tug-of-war.

Zane tugged harder. Even badly wounded. Even broken. His muscles raged with a Godbeast's strength. They did not fail him.

And the Hydra began choking harder too. Choking on the raw force, on the brightening white circle searing deeper and deeper into its necks, cutting off its essence, its blood, life itself…

By now Zane was light-headed. So much essence was rushing out of him at once—he was sputtering, stumbling. Deeply sore wherever he could feel. Every muscle felt like it'd been wrung dry. He was fighting pressed up against his limits—and beyond…

He forced himself to pull even harder. Trying to bring his massive arms together, working his back to its maximum—

His mouth hung open in a silent scream. And his Promethean Noose closed in. Flaring so hot it melted that deep-frozen skin, so hot it seemed to melt the air itself, make a strange splintering reality over its surface—squeezing so tight it locked all those dragon heads together.

The realm's most intense fires pressing up against the realm's

coldest ice, white-blue crushing against white-blue, a line of blindingly intense color—

Huge gallons of steam hissed out at the points of contact. Like the Blizzard Hydra itself might blow.

At first the Hydra felt angry. How dare this little creature challenge it? Then baffled—how could he contain so much strength? Baffled, that it was overwhelming it. And then… desperate. As it felt the life slowly squeezed out of it...

It started fighting for all it was worth. Thrashing wild. Screaming.

And Zane, beaten-down, ruined, had one last task. He had to contain the death throes of a Monster Knight.

It might have been the hardest thing he'd ever asked of his muscles —already stretched to their limits, no power to give. He was so very close to empty. Trembling. Bleeding. Teeth clenched, veins bulging down his neck, his arms… blood vessels started erupting down his heaving back.

And then a greater pain. Rippling down his body. And he felt huge chunks of himself tearing. Down his back. Up his arms. Exhausted muscles giving out at last...

But Zane himself held strong. Bit down through the pain. Eyes narrowed.

He knew he had this Monster exactly where he wanted it.

The Hydra made its final attempt. It turned every head to Zane, eyes bulging, and summoned what essence it could get through.

Zane stared straight into the mouth of a blizzard. As it crashed into him.

Warning!
Health under 25%

He swore to himself then, even as the last sliver of feeling slipped away, that he was not dropping first. He stared down those hateful bulging eyes glaring back at him—so constricted he could see the blood vessels popping through the white. Cold engulfing hot, hot strangling cold…

In the end, the dragon-heads drooped first.

Eyes rolling back. The Blizzard Hydra toppled. Crashed heavily to the ground—and lay there listless.

Broken at last.

Zane sagged to his knees.

Warning!
Critical Health
Savage Body Activated!
Vitality increased 50%
Strength increased 50%

Speed increased 50%

The notification was meaningless to Zane.

He felt so exhausted he could hardly breathe. He just knelt there silent. Feeling a great emptiness inside him. Feeling like it was an immense effort just to open his eyes. His arms, legs, felt like they'd been filled with cement. A darkness hung over his head, slowly swallowing him...

He had nothing left.

He felt a flicker of satisfaction. Deep in his ruined chest. He had gotten the job done. He could hardly even think anymore. Every part of him was shutting down. Body to brain.

Then he heard the Shaman in the distance shouting.

And froze.

The battle was not done.

His friends were still in danger. Reina was still in danger. He made a choking sound.

He stood on rotted, poisoned limbs. On muscles so torn they hardly worked, he could barely even see anymore—it wasn't so much standing than limping and staggering. Like a zombie.

He shuffled toward the fight. He had to protect them. It was the only thought on his mind, animating his whole body, keeping him upright. He had to protect. When you stripped away every last bit of him, destroyed him in body and soul… that was all that was left.

Then he saw it.

The Shaman falling from the sky choking, clutching at his throat—shot through. And Reina, crying out in triumph…

They did it.

Zane blinked.

And keeled over.

***

It was not long before he woke up. In Reina's lap. He felt deeply peaceful. His head was swaddled in the warm softness of her.

He saw the notification first—

Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 249 -> 251

Then her worried face. Then her relieved face.

"It's over," she said. But before she could get more out—

Level 250 reached
Fourth Class Evolution unlocked!

Zane blinked.

The Fourth Class Evolution is a revitalization. The last preparation of the mortal body before the Nascent Soul stage. It is the most significant of the mortal evolutions.

Huh.

Right—he almost forgot about that.

First, this evolution grants the user a Weapon Soul—

Then it looked like one notification interrupted another.

The Signature Title Savage Sage is reacting to the Fourth Evolution.

The Fourth Class Evolution is the Savage Sage's 'Awakening.'

For this title, the Weapon Soul will be applied to the first form of the Soul weapon. Prometheus Chains.

More boxes popped up.

Savage Sage is reacting to the wielder's chosen Path…

Savage Sage is reacting to the Titan Rhino Bloodline…

Class evolved!

Dread Bastion (Mythic [M]) -> Juggernaut Titan (Mythic [E])

Level-up stat bonus: Vitality: +3, Regeneration: +3, Strength: +2.5, Dexterity: +1.4, Speed: +1.2

***

Zane saw his Chains in his mind now. There were gemstones studded into their bases—two silver squares, it looked like, shimmering softly…

His Chains had gone the color of his Bloodline. A Titan-Rhino gray. Blue-white Stormfire streaks ran all throughout them, making up their cores, woven deep within…

They weren't there right now, physically. But he could feel them like a hidden limb—pulsing with his essence, his powers. Always.

The Weapon Soul makes the Soul Weapon a complete part of the wielder, in body and soul. It grants the Soul Weapon a new upgrade path. The Weapon Soul can be fed by reaping the souls of enemies. The higher-Leveled, the more filling.

Huh.

It is currently at Level 3.

At this Level the Prometheus Chains' durability and strength is equivalent to Common Sky-grade Spirit Steel.

Skill learned!

Stormfire Power (Passive) [Legendary (E)]

Any Stormfire Skill used through Prometheus Chains will have

its powers greatly enhanced.

Oh neat.

Then—

Skill learned!

Anchor of the Gods [Active] [Mythic (E)]

Once the Prometheus Chains make sturdy contact with the enemy, they gain an irresistible weight. They can anchor the enemy utterly, making escape impossible.

It was a lot all at once. His Chains had gotten a lot stronger, it looked like—Zane was curious how he could upgrade them… but the evolutions still weren't done just yet.

The System was serious when it said this would be the most significant of Zane's evolutions so far.

The Savage Sage Signature Title is reacting to the Fourth Evolution…

The Savage Sage Signature Title is reacting to the Titan Rhino Bloodline…

Zane did a double-take.

The Savage Sage Signature Title is evolving in accordance with Zane Walker.

…

Savage Body -> Asura Body (Passive) [Signature] Lv. [MAX]

Grants access to the Asura Berserker State.

The more Zane Walker burns his Bloodline and essence, the more his battle frenzy grows, the greater his powers multiply too. At its height, this state grants a twofold increase in raw power, regeneration, and essence regeneration.

He had barely finished reading it when—

Savage Sage Title is reacting to the Evolution…

Savage Sage Title is reacting to Zane Walker's Soul…

Sage Mind -> Great Sage Mind (Passive) [Signature] Lv. [MAX]

Grants hypersensitivity to all activities of the Astral Plane. Expands Sage Mind's feeling-reading abilities. Senses essence flows in the environment and in others.

***

Zane's head hurt a little.

In total then—it upgraded his weapons a lot. Gave him a new Chain Skill. Boosted his Title. Swapped out his Signature powers for better

versions…

He sat there blinking. But it appeared to be done.

That was…

…Hmm.

There were a few upgrades in Zane's life that flipped everything upside-down. His Stormfire was one. His Titan Rhino Bloodline was another. He had a sneaking suspicion he had just stumbled upon his third.

***

Reina was flabbergasted at it all—just one of those upgrades would have been a huge pickup. It had to be his Signature Title's doing, she felt. It intervened somehow.

Evan wanted to see his new Chains, so Zane brought it out.

They were shaped much like his old ones—they just got new colors, new densities, and his Element was built deeply into it. He liked the look of it—powerful, but also pleasing to the eye. Evan thought it was very cool-looking too—he oohed and aahed all over. When those white-blue streaks ran through it, pulsing gently, they circulated essence from his Core.

There were his other new powers too. Humming in the background.

Even just looking around, Zane could feel the essence flowing around their body, it was so much crisper. He felt like an essence bloodhound. He could sense everything, feel everything. It would make Emperor Soul's job a lot easier.

He wondered how his new Anchor Skill worked—he missed grappling. He had let it fall to the wayside some. It would be a nice change of pace again.

Then there was this new Berserker thing. He would have to test it out. There was so much to test. Really this last evolution brought all of his old powers together.

First though. He stood.

Reina mentioned there was a huge yellow dot on the other side of the island. The Monster Knights had left something behind… after all those upgrades Zane was almost embarrassed to take more.

But he still would. Happily.

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228. Good Eating

There was a thick splotch of yellow on the mini-map on the other side of the island. It was a field of glowing soft-blue essence when they arrived, the colors of the wards. The System colors.

They set foot in the region and a notification popped up.

System has detected Internal Tampering
Participants have been subjected to unfair challenges
Restoring balance…
Challenge Difficulty: Hell
Calibrating compensation…

After what happened with the Minotaur, Reina had suspected something like this might come again. The System seemed to like fairness.

Treasures started popping out in front of them, hovering on little lily-pads of blue light. In front of Avery shone a vial of thick green liquid, stoppered with a majestic wax seal.

Veritas Serum [Earth (B)]
Concocted by Grand Alchemist Frei of the Temple of the World Tree, 9th Megannum. This treasure clears the third eye of the mind, allowing for a brief period of clear-seeing. Offers untainted insight into the truth of the world, the Laws that underlie all. Invaluable for Concept comprehension.

“Heyyy!” exclaimed Avery. “Nice!” She’d been looking for something to help get a boost on her Laws.

For Evan, meanwhile, it was lightning in a bottle. Actual lightning. A strange suspension—white bolts crackling around drops of shivering Bloodline, all trapped inside a little vial. Evan gasped at it.

Eureka Lightning Draught [Earth (B)]
A concoction made by the Dewdrop Sage, formerly of the Temple of the World Tree, specifically for those of Raijuu Blood. Incorporates four drops of Raijuu Bloodline. Purifies the drinker's body, allowing it to store great quantities of energy for later use, akin to a battery.

Evan loved it.

In front of Reina, meanwhile, hovered a seed. Seemingly plain—but the more you looked at it, the more profound of a feeling it gave. Like

there were great depths beneath that warm brown surface. Its aura was subtle, but strong.

Everbloom Lotus Seed [Earth (B+)]
A treasure unique to the Mistress Maker, to be integrated into the body. Grants a significant boost to all Growth and Renewal Concepts. This boost, and the treasure's grade, grows as the seed blooms.

She got another treasure too. It looked exactly like the pearl that had hung at the end of the shaman's staff.

Soul Weapon Core [Earth (C)]
Age: 13 millennia
Souls claimed: 800000

Reina was quite pleased with her gifts too.

They would never get this kind of customized treasure offerings in a normal run, she speculated. She thought the Monsters were playing something of a dangerous game—by coming after Zane, and failing, they could end up inadvertently boosting them tons too.

She still didn't like the thought of them targeting him though. Zane caught little looks on her face as she thought about it. She tried hiding it, but he could tell she was furious every time it happened. She had certain little expressions. And this one—eyes narrowed, mouth drawn a little to one side, usually meant she had dark plans on her mind. She never forgot every time they came after him, filed it away in her mind… It was kind of scary.

It would be better for these Monsters' sake if they didn't succeed, Zane felt. He wasn't sure what she would do to them.

She took the seed to imbibe later. As for the Soul Weapon Core, she said Zane should have it—he could make better use of it right now. It would count toward his Soul Weapon.

He would make it up to her, he resolved, one way or another.

Lastly, for Zane—

CLANG!

A giant hunk of steel dropped right in front of him. It was the size of a semi-truck.

Unrefined Spirit Steel Ore [Earth (B)]
An unrefined hunk of Spirit Steel extracted straight from the Sunken Mines of Mount Steelheart, one of the deepest and most valuable mines in its Outer Faction mining district. Each is worth its weight in Earth-grade Spirit Stone.

Then, too—

Soul Weapon Core [Earth (B)]

Age: 15 millennia
Souls claimed: 1.2 million

That had to be the Hydra's portion. And his rewards were complete.

***

After that, they all took a breather to go take in all their treasures. And they needed a little time to rest anyway. First, Reina fixed up the island some—with waves of her hands she got grasses peeking out of the ashes, new rich soil overturning the burnt wreckage, saplings growing to young trees, growing to little links of greenery. Fields of pastel flowers, swaying gently in a fresh crisp breeze. Zane bent down and blinked at one for a bit, sniffed at it.

Then they all went off to their own little corners and got to work.

Zane picked up his hunk of steel, waddled over, set it down. And started melting and drinking it wholesale. And soon the Levels started pouring in, bunches on bunches—

Skill up!
Skill up!
Skill up!
Behemoth Muscle VII -> XI
Skill up!
Skill up!
Skill up!
Colossal Tendons VI -> IX
Skill up!
Skill up!
Indomitable Hide VIII -> XI
Skill up!
Skill up!
Skill up!
Bastion Bone III -> VI

There was a lot of steel to get through. It took him the best part of half a day of nonstop eating.

***

Meanwhile his friends also got their powers. Avery took just a few hours to unlock a new Concept. It was called 'Verisimilitude'—now her illusions could actually do damage if she supplied the essence. She showed off a little flame spirit that exploded on contact. It wasn't much, she said, frowning at it. But she brightened—she was still pretty happy with it. She could finally help beat up the bad guys too, which was her favorite part of the whole thing.

Evan could now charge himself all the way up before battles. It boosted his single shot power a good chunk—and increased how many shots he could throw by nearly 50%. Pretty huge.

Reina, meanwhile, had taken in the Everseed—and scooped up some Levels in the process. She tested her new healing on Zane, and he felt renewed, like he was waking after a long and restful nap. It was obvious how much difference she made when he thought back to the Hydra fight.

***

Deep in the inner reaches of the Azure Flame System…

In a chamber carved deep in the core of a star were two men.

One a lean old man with a wispy white beard. One hand was stumped with blackened fingers. Cross-legged on a plinth of molten steel, as though he'd been meditating.

The other, a regal-looking gray-haired man wrapped in embroidered combat robes. Kneeling, head inclined.

"And that, as far as our scrying can tell, is the extent of his upgrades," said Sage Burnwater, Outer Martial Elder.

Silence from the old man.

"That Title. It has to be responsible for the Awakening Evolution," continued Sage Burnwater. "I've never seen anything like it! It has to be of quite a high caliber, to prompt that kind of response… I could swear I knew all the Heaven-grade Signature Titles."

Burnwater waited there quietly as his Master contemplated.

Sage Noughtfire might think, but he was never stumped. The answers always lay somewhere deep in the recesses of his memory—it just took a while sometimes to pull them out.

And yet...

"I do not know of it either," said the venerable Sage at last.

"Truly?" Sage Burnwater gave a double-take.

Considering how much Sage Noughtfire had seen in his very long life—perhaps a little too long, by the old man's own estimation—it took a lot to surprise him.

"Could it be one of those ancient Titles that lay dormant for tens of millennia, but resurfaces once a Chaos Cycle?"

"No," said Noughtfire. He stroked his beard slowly. "It must come from outside the Dragonspire Galaxy. Zane Walker has attracted the attention of a force beyond our understanding—from the vast reaches of the Celestial Imperium itself."

He paused. Then lapsed back into deep thought.

Sage Burnwater sat there quietly too, not sure what to make of it. Not sure what to do about it either.

Eventually— "Shall I close the file, Master?" he said politely.

Sage Noughtfire quickly lost interest in mortal affairs. Burnwater had seen it happen countless times. The old Sage's mind operated on the timescales of eons, of Chaos Cycles. Only very few prospects—

most recently the current Azure Flame Patriarch—had caught his eye. But they always lost it just as quickly.

Such was the case. When you're one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy, not much rose to your attention.

But this time—

"No," said Noughtfire. "Keep an eye on him."

He closed his eyes. "That is all."

"…Of course," said Burnwater. It took a moment to overcome his shock. The teacup had come down; he knew he was being dismissed. He gave another deep bow, turned to leave—

"It takes a certain kind of man to force True Stormfire into submission," said Noughtfire. His voice carried strong and clear, echoing through the hyper-heated air. "True Stormfire, in its final form. Walking that long and difficult path… It is a matter of the mind. But more so, of the heart."

The wizened old man paused. "Zane Walker may just have what it takes."

Burnwater choked.

That was the closest thing he could remember to Noughtfire giving a compliment.

"Go," said Noughtfire.

"Y-yes, Master!"

***

"What in the Nine Hells is that?" said the Barbarian Sage, brow cocked. "That Title! Is that what gives him the…"

He snapped his fingers a few times, frowning. "Intuition—that's it! His fight intuition!"

The Head Scout winced. "Perhaps, Grand Elder. Perhaps."

The Barbarian Sage burped happily. By now, he had set up camp here—brought out a giant bone throne carved out of the skull of some beast and sat there, legs crossed, right in the middle of the Observatory. A sofa of sorts. To one side of it, he kept a long line of drinks, mostly wines, which he offered many times to the scouts, who declined just as many times, wincing. On the other side, he kept racks upon racks of giant raw meats—he had a bone in one hand and was chomping voraciously as he spoke, blood-spittle flying all over the place.

It was somewhat distracting, to say the least. But the chortling barbarian had decided their job was his personal entertainment, and there wasn't much they could do about it.

"Err—" said the Head Scout.

"You probably can't even articulate what makes him such a good fighter! His conscious mind doesn't know—it's his subconscious that does. It's in the little things! Yes." The Barbarian Sage harrumphed as

he smiled. “It's got to be some Title, I tell you! It’s something else. Say —what is it? I’ve never been one for the annals.”

“I’m not sure, Grand Elder.”

“But it’s remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Grand Elder.”

He grinned. “Then again, you'd expect nothing less—”

“From your Bloodline heir, yes,” said the Head Scout.

For a moment the Barbarian Sage stilled. Harrumphed. Treated the scout to some full-on side-eye. “Could it be you're tired of listening to me spout, Scout Chun?” he said. “You wish I’d shut up, don’t you?”

The Head Scout flinched. “Err—”

“That is a perfectly reasonable position,” said the Sage. And he was cheerful again. “Unfortunately for you I outrank you, my dear Scout! So I shall continue spouting off as I please.”

He chortled as the Scout groaned.

“Hey,” said the Sage. “Want some?”

And he offered the Scout a fat juicy lamb leg, simmering with essence.

The Scout stared at it for a second. It *was* near dinner-time… and that did look quite enticing… the smell had been torturing him for hours, in fact.

Sighing, he accepted. They chewed silently, watching the projections.

“Good, isn’t it?” said the Sage.

The Scout swallowed, dabbed the oil off his mouth. “…Yes,” he admitted.

“See? Undo a button! Loosen a belt!” The Sage started picking his teeth with the bone. “The ‘Steel’ in Steelheart means mettle. Gumption! Not that one ought to *be* a hunk of steel. That is all that’s wrong with this Faction, I tell you.”

This was coming from a man who held the Sect record for longest time spent in martial punishment. When he’d been a prime Chosen they’d nearly expelled the man four times. And succeeded in doing so twice.

Then Scout Chun saw how close the bone was to his head, and thought better of saying it.

“Yes, yes. Zane Walker’s development is coming along quite nicely, I daresay,” chuckled the Sage.

***

Zane and his friends had dinner after they finished powering up. Avery had the idea to play some games to unwind.

She made a net of essence. They were going to play some essence volleyball, she announced. Avery and Evan would be on one team. Reina and Zane on another. Evan was psyched.

They had to quit about 30 seconds in. Apparently having Zane smash something at you, even casually and gently, was quite terrifying. Avery used such phrases as ‘having her life flash before her eyes.’ Zane scratched his head at the smoking crater, helpless. He really hadn’t meant to hit it hard…

They were considering hide and seek. Then they looked at Zane, and decided that would be a little unfair too—just going the other way.

They tried essence darts, which was just Avery throwing up illusions—and the rest of them would try to hit them with essence. Evan was winning so easily he felt bad and pretended to miss, so they could catch up. Evan was not good at pretending.

It was quickly decided physical games were a little too skewed. So they ended up making a little cozy campfire—normal flame, not Stormfire—and roasting S’mores around it. Ingredients Reina had packed because she really did think of everything. It was a nice break before the final stage of the floor.

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229. Asura (I)

Avery wondered what they were even doing here. She thought maybe Integration was a way of conscripting tons and tons of people to help 'muck out' the prison. Like a Universe draft. Reina considered it and felt there was a decent chance of it.

They got to talking about what they'd do after this was all over. Avery had pretty much lived out of a skate park before the Change, bumming food and living carefree after dropping out. She figured she would keep doing that kind of thing. Go around the Universe being a helpful hobo. Beating up any bad guys she came across.

Evan wanted to take up Quests. He nodded happily. He was going to be a Hero and he was proud of it. He used to be a little timid about saying it out loud but not anymore. He would do what he wanted to do, no matter what anyone thought, he said.

As for what Reina and Zane wanted to do… they were both not sure. They looked at each other. A few months ago Zane might have said he wanted to go out there, and fight whatever there was to fight. And he still wanted that. He got restless sitting still.

But he also liked his new home. And the friends he had made there. More and more he wanted to protect them too. Reina felt the same way. They wanted to take care of each other. One thing they were dead set on—they were staying by each other's sides.

***

They made good on this quite quickly.

After Avery and Evan went to sleep Zane and Reina snuck away for a bit. Reina had brought some portable noise wards just for the occasion. They tried to be discreet about it.

…Had there been a seismometer nearby it might still have registered as a low-level earthquake.

Level up!
Essence Level 251 -> 252

They came back early the next morning, casual as could be, like nothing had happened. Reina had to change clothes, but she fixed her messed-up hair. They were hoping no one would notice.

Evan brightened when he saw them. "You guys got new Levels!"

They froze. Avery choked on the essence potion she was drinking.

"Did you find some more Essence treasures out there?" said Evan.

"Yes," said Reina, quite pale. "That's exactly it."

“Oh great!” said Evan.

Then he saw a chunk of pretty ice floating by, and the thought quickly evaporated from his mind.

***

Zane had two more upgrades before they were set to go. The first he couldn't do much about right now. Organ tempering would take more soul recovery to tackle. He wanted to be fresh before his next comprehension.

But he could do something about his new Weapon Soul.

Two dusky pearls floated in front of him. One white, like a snow-globe. The other a tiny world of icy-blue. Both like little suns in the Astral Plane.

He took the first and began to absorb it. As he did, a strange tingling energy swept through him, something under the skin, cool and warm at once, touching the soul…

His hair began to float, and he felt the Weapon Souls' contents gush into him. Fragments of thoughts and feelings, ghostly impressions, gushing in a river... His chains began to shine, heating up as new energy poured into the steel.

It felt like he'd been shot full of adrenaline. He was swept up in other people's feelings, energies—a thousand little impressions, wisps of joy, of sadness, of melancholy and hope floating through him, washed up on the banks of the river of time, flowing into him...

They did not move him much. He knew who he was; he did not lose himself in it. His mind stayed clear, firm. He let them flow around him, through him. And claimed the power left behind.

When it was done, he found he was sweating a little, but otherwise fine.

Time for the second one.

A lot more beasts in this one. Orcs. Phoenixes. Sphinxes. . But a fair share felt vaguely human. It all flowed through his weapon, granting it their powers. Until—

Level up!

Prometheus Chains Level 2 -> 3

At this level, the Prometheus Chains strength and durability is the equivalent of Sky-grade Uncommon Spirit Steel.

His Chains felt a good deal stronger than the rest of him now—he wasn't sure how he could tell, but he had a good sense for it. A feel. The way you know your own body.

He brought them out, inspected their surface.

Strong, muted-dark steel. Streaks of smoking Stormfire running across their surfaces, heating them from within, giving them their own sort of life… it looked like he was staring down at some molten

landscape where the lava ran bright blue.

He liked the look. But what mattered was if they would perform.

He went back to his friends, gathered them, and together they set out again. Looked across the waters, saw a distant fortress rising in the distance, a solemn monolith.

Time to finish off the floor. Time for the final stage.

***

They passed the rest of the bridges without much incident. Arrived on the far banks within a half-day.

The fortress looked a lot like some Roman temple, carved of deep-earth stones. Great pillars rising to support a marble dome arching for the ceiling. Jewels studded down its length.

It was carefully made, every inch of it, like the whole thing was meant to be a sculpture. The stonework was a mass of perfect geometries. Pristine despite all the time—no moss, no rot.

A staircase wide as a highway led up to solemn double doors, rising bare and imposing as cliff faces.

It took a leap just across a single step of that staircase. Their bounds echoed in the silence all the way up to the top.

You have entered: Section 3-1
Doors of Stone

Right before the grand entrance, standing proud on a plinth, was a statue. Some forty-odd feet tall. A blocky thing, a dense mass of pure silver, reinforced plate stacked on reinforced plate, welded together at the joints with thick gold bulbs. It bore a behemoth of a shield and an even bigger hammer, so black it seemed to suck in all the light around it.

The statue let out waves of subtle aura, as though dormant…

Avery squinted at it.

“Sooo. That thing’s definitely gonna come to life, right?” she said.

They took a few steps closer.

… It came to life.

Red eyes flared in that massive helm. And it whirred into motion. Aura erupting. A Monstrous soul awakened.

Eurithes, the Final Guardian (Monster)
Essence Level 283

A thick red splotch landed right in front of them on the mini-map. The sign of a Boss.

A fat shining core seething raw energy was buried deep in its chest —it felt as strong as a peak Core. Whirring softly, spinning the creature up, pumping torrents of essence to the rest of it. A well-oiled machine of destruction. Loaded with the firepower to execute.

If those Wardens had achieved their final form, this would be it.

And Zane felt within the Monster the very same imperative.

KILL ZANE WALKER.

"Get ready," said Reina, eyes narrowing—but Zane touched her shoulder.

"I will take this," he assured her. "Stay back."

When he said this, his heart was pumping hot in his chest. It was a matter of pride, of fighting spirit—that was true.

But his head was clear. He knew this was not overconfidence. He simply trusted himself. After all those power-ups, he felt this creature would be a good test.

He wanted to take the measure of his new body.

Reina nodded. She recognized the look on his face. She knew when he was like this… he was not losing.

He was not losing regardless.

He marched toward the machine.

And it marched toward him too.

Every step that thing took shook the entire staircase. It sank a good foot into the marble ground. There was some Steel Concept seeped into every last inch of it, something that made it ultra-dense, that wove the essence of durability deep into it. The same as with the Wardens—just stronger.

Zane's Chains burst onto his hands.

The Guardian gave a metallic screech like steel grinding on steel—a kind of battle cry. And it charged him, that battering-ram of a shield thrust out in front of it.

Zane charged it right back, roaring lustily. And threw.

His Chain whipped through the air.

They came together, moving like only two tremendously heavy objects did, almost in slow motion. You could see the gravitas, nearly see the power, the momentum endowed…

Then Zane's Chains wrapped around that shield. He narrowed his eyes. And his new Skill took hold.

Anchor of the Gods.

His Chains came to life. To Zane's surprise he even felt his Bloodline in it, racing down the length of it—and when he made to exert his power, his muscles, his tendons, channeled through with such ease… It felt like an extension of him. Another limb. Another expression of his power.

He threw his whole body into one violent pull.

And felt a lurch. Deep inside.

If he did not have a Seamless Core, what happened next might have killed him. The amount of essence dragged out of him in that moment

would have drained any Core under Peak-grade dry. In an instant. And it all raged straight into his Chains…

A tsunami of aura washed down their length.

Slow motion went suddenly very fast.

It was like their weights shot to infinity. Zane could see space curving down the length of them.

This Guardian must have weighed more than any structure mankind had ever built; more than cargo ships and pyramids and skyscrapers.

Then it faced Zane's pull—and face-planted.

Its shield smashed straight into the dense stone ground and sank like it was made of putty. Dragged the whole Monster keening, flailing over—and at the same time Zane's other Chain snagged the falling arm, and anchored it too.

The Monster let out a screech—and crashed. It went far more violent than it had any right to be; normally gravity barely knew what to do with creatures this big. It usually let them down easy, slowly, in chunks.

This thing splattered.

It was violence at a scale seldom seen.

The crater crushed in half the staircase. Sent tremors shivering the riverbank. Webbed the entrance, all the way up to the grand stairs, in deep-set fissures…

And the Guardian lay there. Struggling mightily. Joints screeching, steam leaking out its inside, its core flaring strikingly bright, trying to do something—anything—

This was a Monster whose great specialty was its brute strength. It was exerting all it could—and it barely managed to work its way up to its knees, trembling, joints shrieking all over...

Zane looked at his hands, frowning. Then at the Monster.

His muscles right now were still running at half-power. His blood was just getting battle-hot. But the more this Guardian resisted him, the more he felt it growing…

A new raw power—hotter than anything he'd felt before. Rising from the furthest depths of his soul. It was a ferocious thing, a savage thing, and all it wanted to do was burn. Burn his Bloodline, burn his essence, his Stormfire, his very battle-spirit, all at once—

The very essence of Zane. Burning for all it was worth.

Asura Body activated!

His body erupted in Stormfire. In Bloodline. In essence. All at once—in one glorious explosion, all three coming together in one majestic alchemy.

He bellowed.

And his powers shot to untold heights.

Greater than the sum of their parts. Greater than anything he had ever known—and rising still…

The Guardian was still trying to get to its feet. Desperate.

Zane snorted.

Flexed. And his body responded.

It felt like crushing an insect.

Wrecking-ball joints snapped at the hinges. Those pillar steel arms splayed out—and the Guardian rammed hard into the ground, steel squealing.

And this time when it tried getting up again… it couldn't move anything but its eyes.

Zane frowned down at it.

Weak.

It tried firing off a skill, steel blast shooting out of its hands, vast gobs of essence driving into the earth, fighting just to flail—but it was facing a level of power it simply could not measure up against.

This was Zane's Fourth Evolution.

Zane leaped over its fallen chest. And plunged two thick hands deep in. Where its heart should be. Burying his way through the pipes. Grabbing at the raw material of its core.

The Monster. Wheezed. Shook. But there was nothing it could do. It tried a last-ditch attack; its core went white-hot, and Zane felt a beam of pure power rushing up to greet him—

Zane grunted. Took the blast. Stomped down. And pulled. Straining. Standing. Head, chest both lifting, rising—

The pipes snapped off one by one. The laser started struggling, sputtering—

And Zane tore the heart right out of it.

The red in the Guardian's eyes faded. It gave one last weak spasm. And went still.

He stood there panting for a moment, head still throbbing hot. He blinked. At his hands, at the beast.

That was it?

… Huh.

He had not even gotten under 75% Health.

He had come into this confident… it seemed he had still undershot it. Which was new for him.

Level up!
Essence Level 252 -> 253

He was still panting so hot he could see it warping the air… he could feel his body powering down. Settling from that furious rush…

This Guardian was meant to be a Boss-level threat. Over Level 280.

It was strange to imagine far lesser versions of it had ever come close to defeating him.

Maybe he really had just gotten a lot stronger.

He looked back at his friends.

Evan was gasping. Avery was staring. Even Reina's mouth was a little open.

After a pause—

"Jesus Christ, dude!" cried Avery.

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230. Asura (II)

Just up the stairs—

You have entered: Section 3-2
Hall of the Ancients

They stood right outside the door of it—two pale walls. Giving away nothing. You couldn't see much beyond either.

The mini-map showed a void beyond. Like its sight was blocked.

Avery marched up to it and squinted at it for a bit.

"Uhh," she said after a little while. "Yeah—that thing's packed full of Monsters. And they definitely don't look like they're from here."

According to her it was a bunch of Ogre-things. Meaty, spiked-club-wielding, drooling, red-eyed types. Cracking knuckles. All in the Level 270s.

"Yeah. Something tells me it's not a coincidence they're here," said Avery, wrinkling her nose. "They want to give you the business."

"Hmm," said Zane.

A pause.

"Soooo," said Avery. "What now?"

"I will give them the business," said Zane.

He felt no need to rest right now. He was fresh. And after the Guardian these sounded like light work. Nothing that could trouble him.

He cracked his knuckles.

It was time to clean house.

***

Grand Chieftain Helgax licked a fat drop of drool off his fangs. He was hungry—as were the rest of his Blood Guard. As was tradition, these twenty of his race's most elite warriors had starved themselves for ten days and ten nights before coming here. So their bloodlust would be at a peak. So they would fight like hungry rabid animals.

They were rabid enough as it was.

The Chained One had given them this great honor. To portal down in secret from their dens in the 64th floor and crush a certain target. An uppity human man, it was said.

It was in the nature of Ogres to crush. There was nothing they liked to do better. This man of flesh and blood was, said the Chained One, a great hope for forces of the living. A man who could rise to one day be a powerful force at the peak of this Chaos Cycle, when the Jailbreaks

came, and the Monster Waves could take to the world once more…

He could not be allowed to live.

Helgax had brought his very best. The very elite of the Blood Guards, bred from birth on the bloody battlefields of Lygar where one in ten survived—but only by slaughtering the other nine.

He appraised them with cracked red eyes, baring his teeth in a leery grin.

Spiked steel clubs were clutched in fists big enough to crush human heads. Bone-necklaces hung round their tree-trunk necks, strung up with skulls. Their panting filled the air with noxious fumes. Dozens of red eyes, grinning slicked teeth, fat gobs of leaking drool… Purebred killing machines.

If they managed this feat, they would be greatly rewarded, the Chained One had promised! Helgax himself would receive a promotion to Monster Knight.

The thought alone was enough to drive him to slobbering frenzy. To receive a Bloodline—a splinter of a Heavenly Demon Bloodline—to receive a Weapon Soul to boot, to gain greater sentience and rise from the ranks of the rabble—it was any Monster's most fervent desire.

So there his brethren waited. In ancient halls that once belonged to a mighty dwarven kingdom, halls lined with statues of their heroes and kings—all crumbled now. Broken. The ones left intact, his Blood Guard had smashed. They liked the sounds of breaking.

Then—as one—they stiffened. And their panting grew heavier, quicker, making the hall a den of poisonous smoke. Their ugly grins widened.

Their prey was coming. Stood before the grand doors.

It was a strange thing. Usually when approaching the unknown, humans would have a scent of cautious fear about them. A nervousness. Helgax could smell it from miles off. But this man… reeked of nothing.

Helgax frowned. It did not matter whether this human feared or not. Once he fell under Helgax's club, once he felt their overwhelming might, once the screaming began, once he realized he was trapped in a chamber of death…then the fear would seep into him.

Helgax snorted gleefully.

The doors cracked. Started opening wide. And his brethren could hardly contain their slobbering; acid spittle dripped in wide hissing pools, melting chunks of floor. Their clubs started flaring with Earthen Laws, one by one, base Bloodlines burning in their veins…

The man that stepped through was so large he might have been an Ogre himself. So wide he seemed to swallow up the space of the entrance. Rippling with muscle. Glowing brilliant-blue Chains wrapped his big fists. His eyes were pits of absolute black.

The man's eyes narrowed. And he got to work.

Helgax was right.

There was a display of overwhelming might.

A crushing. A screaming. *BANG-BANG-BANG*—whole bodies' worth of blood splattering down the halls...

Then the fear began.

***

Helgax limped his one good arm over the blood-slicked stone floor, crawling as best he could, whimpering. It was the only part of him that had not been crushed to a pulp.

He was not even thinking then—he just had to get away—

The hallway had been pristine at the start of it. Now every last inch was painted with many coats of deep red. The color of Ogre blood.

Then he heard the sounds coming closer. *THUD. THUD. THUD*.

The aura pouring out of that man was like nothing Helgax had felt—it might even compare to a Monster Grand Knight.

The Chained One had sent them to die.

Helgax shrieked, thrust out an arm—

An incredible force crashed over him. And he saw no more.

***

Reina brought up the rear cautiously, coming to get a look at the aftermath. Then Evan. Then Avery, eyes wide.

Zane scratched his head. Looked back at the hall, then back at his friends. Frowned. He had gotten blood on his head.

At least it was quickly vanishing. Going to essence. Pouring into him.

Level up!
Essence Level 253 -> 254

"Uh. Y'know, big fella..." said Avery, blinking at him. "All I'll say is I'm sure glad you're on our side! ‘Cause…”

She whistled.

He glanced back down the hallway. It did kind of look like a horror movie. And there was lots of screaming... Hmm.

Reina, meanwhile, had no reservations about it. They wanted to kill him. They were waiting to ambush him. They deserved what came to them—should have gotten worse, in her mind. She was very pleased it went the way it did. Somehow the caring part of her brain, which was most of her, quieted down when things tried to hurt Zane. She got too angry.

Zane enjoyed dominating. But Reina liked seeing him like that too—it was her favorite version of Zane.

***

They made it through the wrecked hallway and into the next zone.

You have entered: Section 3-3
Royal Treasury

They turned a corner. Now the walls were made of pure gold. At the far end of this new hallway, a massive vault door was built deep into the precious metal. Covered in thickset locks. It had some kind of array seal over it. But that had lost most of its power by now. Thick streams of essence billowing from the other side…

Treasure. Tons of it.

Only, something guarded the door.

Grand Bullion Warden (Monster)
Essence Level 285

These dwarves really liked their golems. They built them chunky. This one was made out of some kind of solid gold. Gemstones made the joints, each a little fountain of power.

It came to life at the sight of him.

Here he went again.

Zane made to roll up his sleeves. Then he realized he was already shirtless. He shrugged, and waded in.

This one had pretty interesting powers. It could consume its own gemstone joints for energy. And it had so many cores, it could draw on a lot before it sputtered out.

The thing with absolute strength, though, was it had a way of making everything else irrelevant.

In the end it didn't matter what powers this new shiny Warden had. Zane took out his chains and crushed it flat in five brutal strokes. When you crushed pretty much anything, they came out looking about the same.

Zane blinked at the flattened, sparking, groaning remains. He was still only breathing slightly heavy. His health hadn't even gotten under 75%.

He did not find that very hard either.

It was getting difficult to escape the conclusion that this First Floor had nothing left for him. He had outgrown it.

Reina was a little surprised too, on how easy things were going down… with how the Monsters had treated him, she would've expected them to stack stronger resistance. Maybe they already had—maybe they just hadn't thought he would grow this fast. Maybe they'd underestimated his Fourth Evolution.

Whatever the case, it was clear they were not ready for this new Zane.

Which was all the better.

Down the hall, there seemed to be one last section. The final stretch—where Reina suspected they kept their nastiest stuff.

Before then, though.

Treasure.

***

Zane tore the locks off the Dwarven Royal Treasury with a few casual swipes, grabbed the giant metal door, ripped it off its hinges, flung it casually behind them like a frisbee. It careened through the entrance hall, slammed through the grand doors, crashed to a halt somewhere in the far distance.

They went on through.

You would expect the dwarves to have tons of great steel. But what they came across still surprised him.

It was a warehouse so big you couldn't see where it ended any which way, even up—a maze of shelves stacked high to the ceiling, all glittering… Zane's head was swimming. Everywhere he looked—rows upon rows of silver, gold, diamond.

A good chunk of it, likely most of it, was not good enough to be worth taking a bite of anymore for him. His body had reached too high a level. These were mostly Mortal-Grade S-rank Spirit Steels—nothing to him now. They kept walking, blinking at all the shiny; came across shelves of F-rank Earth Steels—but even those wouldn't do much for him anymore.

But the shelves went on and on. And soon, when they got to the furthest depths of it, they found the good stuff.

***

Stacked at the very end in great gleaming cubes…

Starsteel Ore [Earth (D)]

Prime-grade ore mined from Asteroid Belt YXN-B, of the Mount Steelheart Outer Faction.

A shelf full of it. Stacked alongside blocks upon blocks of C-grade Mithril.

Just looking at it was making Zane hungry.

It was almost too much—even Reina was having trouble wrapping her head around it all. He wasn't sure he could finish it all if he tried.

He sure would try though.

After she got over the initial shock of it, Reina told him, with some excitement, she wasn't sure they would ever come across another stash like this. Even in the next few floors. They had better stock up while they could—and being Reina, she had brought lots of storage capacity to spare. Avery and Evan both got Interspatial Rings and scampered about lugging in steel by the rack-full.

For Zane, meanwhile, it was time for the great experiment. To see just how much raw steel could fit in one Zane.

A dwarven kingdom's royal treasury, underground… he got a

suspicion Reina was right. This could be one of the richest stocks they'd find in a long time. He would seize this chance.

Now that he thought about it, he had pretty much walked the realm. He had gone through the entrance, and crushed their Wardens. Gone through their cities and wrecked their fortresses. And stormed the castle now too. He had conquered all it had to offer him.

Now he got to claim his reward.

***

Skill up!
Skill up!
Skill up!

The notifications came in a torrent.

It took a full day and a full night to hit Zane's limit. And they did find out that he had one.

A notification popped up at a certain point—

Mythic Skill Cap XV has been reached!
Upgrade to: 32 drops to advance

It was a bottleneck he never thought he would hit.

In the meantime—

Behemoth Muscle XI -> XV

Four Levels of Behemoth Muscle. By now it was safe to say he had reached full-on overkill again. There was nothing here he felt he could not lift. He felt he could pick up a whole rack of steel blocks and sent it crashing into the ceiling if he liked. He could no longer gauge his strength adequately by the things of this realm. Only strong Monsters could offer his fists resistance now.

Colossal Tendons VI -> XV

Nine Levels. If he leaped hard enough his head would go shooting through the ceiling. He had to stop Leveling every few hours to learn how to walk again—and even then it took a while to stop crashing into things….

Indomitable Hide IX -> XV

He had gotten a lot of blood on him today. None of it his own. He was curious to see if anything left here could even make him bleed now.

Bastion Bone VI -> XV

He knew he should not feel unbreakable. That was dangerous. Yet even he could not understand the limits of his body right now.

It was a good thing he had hit some cap, anyway. He felt stuffed to the point of bursting. He had so much raw physical energy inside of him—it was almost too much. He did not know what to do with it all…

Zane looked down at his hand. He knew the Monsters were watching him too. All this came because they tried to break him. He wondered what they were thinking, seeing what they had created.

He wondered what they were thinking, knowing he was coming for them.

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231. Asura (III)

It wasn't just steel in there, though that was most of it. When they pocketed all the good stuff—enough to fill seven Interspatial Rings—they found stashes of essence treasure left behind too, packed up in crates.

Mostly vials of essence, C- and D-grade. Those he gave to Evan, Reina, and Avery—it would do a lot more for them. And Zane wasn't sure he could ingest anything else today anyway.

After they went through them all, Reina and Avery got into the high Levels 230s, Evan in the high 240s—almost to his Fourth Class Evolution too. Once they got their evolutions, Zane was sure they would be a lot stronger too. It would be interesting to see by how much.

***

It was a long walk down to the final hall. A bare stone hallway lined with pillars—that was all. Suspiciously bare. That should have been the first sign.

Zane bumbled on ahead. Heard a creak. Looked left.

CLANG!

A flaming steel wrecking ball blasted out of the wall, smacked him right in the face. And exploded.

The wrecking ball, that was. Zane's head stayed where it was. The wrecking ball shattered around him, chunks of molten metal going every which way.

His friends were blinking at him.

"I think the corridor is booby-trapped," Zane informed them.

"Thanks," said Avery.

Reina was thinking about how to clear it.

Zane just started walking.

CLANG! BOOM! BZZT—

Reams of black lightning cascaded from the ceiling. The walls crashed in from either side, shoved by massive pistons. Poison spikes shot out from the floor. White-hot fire blasted from the pillars.

Then Zane got to the end of it.

"I think that's all of them," said Zane.

"…"

***

They'd almost come across the final section now. The mini-map compass pointed around a corner—and after that, a few hundred paces down, it opened up.

Zane found himself perking up.

He had been running through everything so far. Nothing had even given him a good test. Nothing had gotten him warmed up.

He was itching for a good fight. Something that, at last, would let him express power to its fullest.

Then he felt the auras.

They had sent more Monster Knights for him. And more than one—with how thick it was…

He was feeling optimistic.

***

Avery scampered up and did a little scouting, just in case. Peeking around the corner, scouring far with her far-seeing.

"Huh," she said. "Okay! So here's the deal."

She made an illusion, floating right before them.

It seemed to be a throne room. Cavernous, torch-lit.

Three Monsters dominated the space.

Each of them a Monster Knight.

The first—

Earth Dragon Turtle (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 296

It was in the name—the body of a Turtle, the head of a dragon, silver tongue lapping out of a beaky mouth. The thing took up almost a quarter of the room. Its shell was made of scales so big and so thick they looked like armor plates, stacking over each other, welded together to make a fortress of bleak earth and shiny metal. As though the beast carried a slab of a continent on its back.

And there was a Bloodline there too, according to Avery. Deeply interwoven through the scales—strong. As strong as that Hydra's, at least. Its legs were laden with so much bone, and muscle, and scale they looked like mountains. Rooted to the ground. Its whole body was. It was a tank of a being.

Its head was one black monolith. Just as armor-laden as its body. Clouds of steaming essence drifted from its every snort.

Then there were the two creatures flitting around it.

Mach Wyvern (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 277

Small and dragon-like, though, their wings and bodies were made of sleek curving angles, honed to a fine point at the tip of its nose. It reminded Zane of those stealth fighter planes.

Black lightning crackled out of their open maws… they flickered in and out of sight, right behind the Dragon-Turtle. Like they were using it as some enormous shield—just peeking out.

Zane frowned at them.

Bird Monster Knights. Two. That… Hmm.

He turned to Evan.

"Can you take care of them?"

"Um," squeaked Evan.

"I will be counting on you," said Zane. "It will all depend on you. I need your help."

Evan gasped. Zane felt the Power of Friendship flare up. He scratched his head, searched for more activation phrases.

"…If we lose, Earth is doomed," he tried. "But if we win—Earth will be saved. Once and for all."

Evan gasped even harder. The Power of Determination shot up too. He nodded quickly, eyes bright. "You can count on me!" he cried.

Zane gave the boy a head-pat. He had loaded up Evan. They were ready.

Reina was still inspecting their enemies—she thought the arrangement was pretty peculiar. The Ogres had been a pack, but she doubted these creatures came together in nature. They were also well-coordinated—sticking tight to the Turtle, never straying, while the beast itself was stock-still.

The Dragon-Turtle seemed to draw power from the ground. While it was standing there it was rooted—there was some kind of connection through its Bloodline. It seemed to have no intention of moving.

"They're trying to counter you," she told Zane.

Reina's theory was that they were trying to wear Zane out. Have the turtle take all the hard shots while those Wyverns whittled him down, sniping at him—it really was meant to act as a shield.

"Hm," said Zane. As an anti-Zane strategy he supposed it really wasn't bad. Then he looked to her.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked.

She hesitated, considered the Dragon Turtle some more. She was going to suggest something—maybe a way to bait out the Wyverns, take them out first, and then go for the Turtle… but she was also thinking about how Zane had handled the Golem. And the Ogres. And the Hydra…

This was meant to be the Monsters' finishing blow. And Reina liked to err on the safe side. But even still—

"They must've sent that thing before your evolution—like with the others," she said. "It shouldn't be able to stop you."

Zane nodded. "That's what I thought too."

She wondered why he asked. He shrugged. He trusted her. He

wanted to make sure he was not being silly.

Because his first feeling on seeing that thing was that he really, really wanted to smash it. It was hard to explain why. Some things looked very satisfying to break. It would please some deep-down part of him to crack it wide open.

Maybe it was because he knew they thought he could not do it. That this creature was meant to stop him.

It was a naked challenge to his greatest strength.

His heart yearned to rise to it.

***

He told Evan if he could get a clear shot at those birds, he should take them. If not, Zane would get rid of the block. And then he was counting on Evan.

Evan nodded. He was so ready he was quivering a little. Reina was right behind him, ready for support.

"Um," said Avery. "What do I do?"

No one had a clue. They thought about it for a bit. She could try to confuse the birds too, Zane supposed, if she could hit them… but it would be rather hard. And he doubted it would be necessary.

This would not be close.

Eventually, it was decided they didn't really need her to do much in this one.

"Then I'll provide critical moral support!" she declared.

She took out a giant foam Zane face.

Zane frowned—when did she—then he remembered. It was way back. When he dueled that one dude whose name he could not recall. Back in the Luminous Faction when he was consolidating Washington, conquering all the other Factions there.

His name was Ethan, Reina gently reminded him. Actually, the guy was one of her Corporals. Vice head of training for new Faction recruits. Zane blinked. Good for him.

Anyway.

Avery shuffled off to the side.

"Go Zane!" she cried. "Wooo!"

Zane went.

***

He marched into battle. He felt his breaths coming in… out… timed to the beating of his heart.

His flesh. His spirit. His blood. Everything about him used to be separate, each an aspect of him. But in the Asura State he was made whole. One seamless being, each power making the others stronger.

His blood burned, his essence burned, his heart raced, his Stormfire raged. His muscles, his tendons, all firing at once—

A burning chain linking his body and soul, making the complete

machine of his being. That was his new Savage Body. He felt it clearer and clearer every time he called on it.

Breathe in. Step. Breathe out—and this breath came hotter than the one before, distorting the air…

Reina came right behind him. Evan too.

In the far distance he saw the Dragon-Turtle. Felt its aura, its Bloodline, just like it'd felt him way off. It had already started burning its powers. Just as he had.

As the Turtle's Bloodline burned, new stone crusted over old, raising yet more layers of scale…

Zane stepped into the chamber, got a closer look at it, could feel the Concepts woven deep through it. The ruggedness of Steel and Earth shone inside, a feeling of immortality, of permanence that could only belong to the most ancient of stone… there were Skills, too, running through it. An ocean of essence.

It was plain why they thought Zane could not break this.

He opened his hands. And his Meteor Hammers flared bright to either side of him.

He crouched. Fists clenching. This time the Mach Wyverns peeked out to either side, black lightning crackling at their nose-tips. The Dragon-Turtle opened its maw, let loose a groan of a battle-cry…

They attacked at the same time Zane did.

Lightning. Earth. Steel. Dark. Immobilizing. Crushing. Fossilizing. A torrent of Concepts and Elements thundered over him.

He stomped. Set his jaw. Burst straight through.

And returned fire.

Just as he thought—the birds zipped right behind the Turtle, shrieking for cover. The Turtle shrank back into the safety of its shell.

Just as Zane's hammers descended.

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232. Asura (IV)

CLANG-CLANG!

Chain Combustion rocked the air, stringing up blast after blast—laying waste to the shell below. Chunks of heavy steels spewed off the thing, lit up Stormfire blue, little meteor showers racing into the gloom...

The light cleared. Showing gaping craters. Fissures snaking through that smoking slab.

But it held together.

Zane blinked.

That was a little surprising.

It seemed all that stuff—that Law, that essence, that big heft of crust—it was not for show after all.

Then it began to rumble. As though struck by an earthquake. New raw stone, raw steel rucked up from deep inside, stemming the gaps—it was the Bloodline's doing. He saw it channeling up those pillar-like legs. Traced the essence with Sage Mind. It fountained up from deep within the earth...

The Dragon Turtle couldn't move. It didn't hit particularly hard either. All it did was defense, it seemed. And it had thirty-odd Levels on him. He supposed it made sense they thought it could hold him.

One thing, though.

He was still getting warmed up.

He could feel his body coming to life. His muscles burning. His heart still thumping faster and faster, his breaths coming in steaming clouds…

He only grew more eager at the sight.

He had been waiting for some resistance.

He wondered how much more it could stand. It would be fun to try crushing it head-on. Setting his greatest power against its own. And wrecking it. Something about shows of brute strength scratched a particular itch in his brain.

Then he noticed the cracks shimmering up the walls of the chamber. All around. Racing down the sandstone floor, up those once-pristine pillars—

It seemed to hold itself up, the Turtle was draining the structure out of the room.

Which meant if Zane started clobbering…

Hm.

He hesitated.

Maybe he should go about this a little cleaner.

There was a silence as everything settled. Stopped shaking.

Then the Birds peeked out from behind their hiding spots—they started making these high-pitched sounds like steel grinding on steel. A kind of laughter. At Zane, since he hadn't gotten them after all.

Black lightning crackled on their nose-tips.

And they started shooting at him again.

The shots came blink-quick. Impossible to dodge. Little static shocks stabbing at the skin—the annoying thing was Zane was still made of steel. So they went all the way through him.

A week ago they might have laid him out spasming. But with how much he'd built up his body, even Monster Knights' shots didn't hurt much anymore. Just hard stabbing jolts. Jerking through him.

It still annoyed him, though.

He frowned.

Stupid birds.

This would soon backfire.

The more heated he felt, the more powerful. It was his Asura State. His essence, his blood, his soul all went into it—but the core of it, the thing that drove it all, was the intensity of his feeling. You could hear it building in each strong thudding heartbeat. See it in the way his chest heaved, his aura smoldered…

Zane took a deep breath. Opened his hands. And the Chains vanished.

He stood there, waiting. One beat. Two... ate another few shocks, eyes narrowed. It spasmed his hands, jerked a bicep. Little things—the birds were crowing like they had scored fatal blows.

He narrowed his eyes.

His Axes dropped to his palms.

They were bigger than he remembered. Still pure-black, edged Stormfire blue-white. Not the kinds of axes you used for trees. Or even to chop down men. Zane's axes were heavy-duty. Meant to carve open anything he wanted.

It had been a while. He wondered if these things still worked like he remembered.

Overhead he saw Evan return fire, saw bolts of white light streaking overhead breaking up the black lightning, saw the birds zipping around teetering, always a little out of reach. Evan's shots bounced off the Dragon Turtle's shell. Evan cried out in dismay.

Meanwhile Reina was still healing Zane up. Boosting him back to full Health—

He felt a sneaky intent flare across the chamber. His heart sank.

He threw himself forward—and ate a blast of black lightning arcing straight for Reina. He landed smoking, black lightning crackling across his skin….

He gritted his teeth.

And the Axes in his hands burst into Stormfire. Piercing blue-white slicking down impossibly fine crescent edges.

His aura spiked to the ceiling.

It blew out—seeming to fill the room in an instant, a haze of ghostly flame erupting, flaring so bright it made every other aura there seem a pale shadow.

And now it had gotten so hot that the air around him was catching fire. Spontaneous gouts of Stormfire sparking into being—

Zane bellowed.

If they wanted him angry, they had it.

He stared down his enemy with narrowed eyes. And launched himself straight at them.

They shrieked, hid—and the Dragon Turtle hunkered in, tried drawing from deep within the earth. Counting on its powers to save it.

Not this time.

He unleashed a Stormfire Slash.

SCHLUNK!

One clean sound. One brilliant smoldering line carving up the air so pure, so intense it seemed to split the world in two. And for the first time voids ran roughshod through the realm, splitting it down its length—cracking this reality wide open—

Zane's axe skidded to a furious halt some forty-odd feet away.

There was a deathly silence. As though the world were holding its breath, frozen, scared to bear the consequences of what just happened —

That brilliant line ran straight through the Dragon-Turtle's foreleg. Hanging still in the air...

And then—all at once—every point along that line exploded. In a terrific Chain Combustion.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM!

A machine-gun of cannon-blasts; the Dragon Turtle howled, teetered, slid around its husk of a stump, slowly collapsing—

Just as Zane's other axe slashed deep through the other side.

The world hadn't even stopped shaking when it was set rocking on its axis again. A flood of sound and light blinded the world, slowly fading...

And that connection deep to the earth—that connection to a huge chunk of its bloodline—was broken.

The Dragon Turtle had no choice but to slump. Its back legs were shaking—the whole thing looked about to come crashing down—

The birds scrambled about, screeching, all thoughts of attack lost, trying as best they could to sneak back behind the beast, trying to keep their shield—

They still thought it would save them.

There was another silence. Things had gone so quiet all you could hear was the thumping of Zane's heart. Like a war drum beating heavy in the air… One. Two. Three.

And his hammers burst back to his fists.

Then the Dragon-Turtle—bleeding out, Bloodline powers cut off, little more than a stump—saw what he meant to do. And all it felt was fear. It brought up all it had left. Those lakes of essence it stored deep in its main body, all those Laws still weaving through its shell, poured as much Bloodline as it could muster—

Zane bellowed. And let his hammers fall.

BOOM!

The first blew the peak straight off its mountain of a shell. Crushing off a good third of it then and there.

The second crashed straight down the crater. *BOOM!*

And the whole thing split open, cracking in half, landslides of steel and stone spewing down the sides—the shell sagged precariously then, wrecked utterly, shaking, burning, smoldering, threatening to come apart at the seams—the Dragon Turtle howled. Tried clinging on.

Zane kept coming. Relentless.

He whirled around, whipped, brought the brunt of his whole body, every last screaming muscle to bear. And rammed in two more. *BOOM-BOOM!*

The first slash broke that continent-slab-shell like an egg.

The second drove through and hammered deep into the beast's insides. Found a host of vital organs—and submerged them in a world of Stormfire. It expanded blistering fast. Seizing on the innards, swallowing them up, making new fuel… The Turtle opened his eyes, opened its mouth, trembling like a volcano about to blow. And gouts of Stormfire blew out of its nostrils, its eyes, its mouth—scorching it white-hot from the inside…

The smoke cleared. And a massive burning hunk of charred stone, charred melting steel, slumped to the ground—and Stormfire still raged over it like a rabid hound, gnawing at the remains…

Even the birds had taken some of the backlash. They hacked out plumes of ash.

They looked rather silly now, floating there with their big shield gone.

Evan let out a battle cry—and started throwing all he could. It was his moment.

The birds shrieked and ran for it. Made like insects, flitting across the room.

But Evan was on it, tracking them all the way. Zane appraised him. He was quite proud of how far Evan had come. Evan locked on, face all scrunched up in determination—and let loose a laser-beam so bright it looked like a solar flare.

He didn't need to bring the beasts down entirely. Just hamper them.

Sure enough—the shot ran clean through a webby Wyvern wing, sending it into a smoking tailspin.

And Zane launched. Tendons flaring.

He snatched up the falling bird by the throat. And squeezed.

That amount of force did strange things. Made its lower body and upper body bulge like a balloon, made its eyes pop out as it choked.

Then he slammed it hard into the ground.

When Zane was not trying to go hard, things tended to splatter.

When he went hard, things tended to disintegrate. That was what happened with this bird's head. So much force went through it in an instant it skipped phases of matter. Splattered to blood to a fine mist. Vanished, smoking, burning up.

The other bird saw what happened to its companion. Tried flapping away in a panic, screeching—and Evan got it right through the eye. Zane found it sputtering on the ground, and smashed it. Then smashed it again, for good measure.

And that was that.

***

Level up!
Essence Level 254 -> 255

Those were very specialized Monster Knights—they had been made with their teams in mind. They only seemed good at one thing. Once you got rid of that, Zane found them surprisingly easy to crush. No harder than any normal Monster. But Reina told him that was more of a him thing than a them thing.

He wasn't sure what set them apart from normal Monsters. According to what Reina could glean, it was their Bloodlines and their Weapon Cores—it seemed to grant them a new tier of power at the same Level.

Speaking of Weapon Cores. Zane now had three new ones to play with. Two sleek black ones, a bigger gemstone of a third. He wondered if it would be enough to upgrade his Chains another time.

Just then—

System has detected internal tampering

Participants have been subjected to unfair challenges
Restoring balance…
Challenge Difficulty: Hell
Calibrating compensation…

Zane blinked.

Then, right in front of him—

Nuwa's Elixir of Talent [Earth (B)]
The signature brew of the Grand Alchemist Nuwa, this Elixir sharply boosts one's cultivation talent for a period of 3 hours.

Oh, nice.

He figured it would be useful for the next floor. Maybe if he came across a horde of Monsters to smash, or a big stash of elixirs. He pocketed it.

Reina had been given the same thing. A matching pair. This made sense to him.

Evan, meanwhile, got an essence treasure called a 'Good Fortune Cookie.' He gasped all excited. He started telling Zane that it was made by this one old man he had apprenticed under in baking all those years ago. The guy had been some kind of undercover master this whole time.

Zane was not sure what was going on there.

Anyway—it should be enough to get Evan his fourth Class Evolution.

Avery also got a treasure, to her own surprise. She got six more drops of White Fox Bloodline. She thought the System must have been happy with how hard she cheered. Now she just needed to get one more Concept, and she could unlock a brand new Godbeast Skill. Something to do with mirrors. She was psyched.

At the end of the chamber, meanwhile, a new staircase had opened up….

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233. Machinations

The staircase spanned half the room. It led into a gloom of bruised purples and swirling blacks. Crackling streamed from deep within, the sounds of eager fire. Cavernous groanings. A relentless heat pounded from inside. There was a smell of brimstone, of charring meat. Ghostly shrieks wafted out, as though slowly tortured…

Reina did not like it one bit. Avery squinted at it. Evan maintained a positive attitude. Zane, meanwhile, was still eager. That fight was good—but it still hadn't really pushed him. He wanted more.

But before they moved on, they decided to do one more round of power-ups. Mostly for Evan and Avery.

Another day did it. Avery finished up one last Concept—the Concept of Reflection. That plus her Godbeast Bloodline meant she got a new skill: Mirror Shield. She could summon these big glassy shields that bounced attacks right back.

Evan happily took his Cookie. His Fourth Evolution came in an exultation of golden light.

His soul weapon got a massive upgrade—from a saber to a big shining pristine sword, something a royal knight might wear. It was almost a little too big for him—he was kind of wobbly underneath it. The Weapon Soul was set in its hilt: a golden orb. Evan loved it.

It rocketed up the firepower of all his Skills. Even far stronger beings would have to be wary of his sniping now, especially with his friends nearby to boost him.

He also got a special movement Skill that let him ride on rays of sunlight. It was called the 'Hero's Journey'. With it, he could pretty much teleport around the room. Speeding here and there, blasting things to smithereens.

He and Avery tried testing their new Skills by playing some ping-pong, shooting Evan's new solar-flare beams all over the chamber. But even Evan didn't realize how much stronger he got. He loosed one fat laser that blasted straight through the top of a pillar—and disintegrated it instantly. It almost caved in the roof.

They stopped after that.

Zane and Reina only found out after coming back—they had snuck off to do some of their own Leveling. But despite lots of hard work, they couldn't quite manage it—they'd have to wait until the next floor.

Zane's last Level Up was for his Chains. He took in the three Weapon Spirits he'd just gotten, and—

Level up!
Weapon Soul 4 -> 6
At this Level the Prometheus Chains' durability and strength is equivalent to Rare Sky-grade Spirit Steel.

Nothing had come close to testing its durability or strength before. It was even more overwhelming now.

Together they descended…

***

Superdungeon
Floor ???

There was a floor deep in the Superdungeon—so deep it nearly went down to the bottom—that held just one prisoner.

It was a lightless realm. Walls of obsidian bedrock. And every inch of it, plunging into the seemingly endless depths, was etched with glowing runes. Powered by enough Heaven-grade Spirit Stones to last several Chaos Cycles.

Torches of cold white fire lit the way, spiraling down, down, down…

At the very bottom of this strange well, there stood a pillar of unblemished white rock. A flat monolith. Two symbols were carved on the very top of it in a language long lost.

One of them meant Suppress. The other, Contain.

Chains snaked out from this pillar. Chains of a caliber of craftsmanship only a handful of true masters in the Dragonspire Galaxy could fathom. Binding a single creature to that pillar. Stabbing through its flesh. Locking its essence, its Laws, even its soul…

All was silent.

The creature had a wormlike body, so big you could've mistaken it from a distance for rolling barren hills. Shadows clung to every inch of it, smoking and whispering. It was flecked with inky scales. Six tattered wings sprouted out its back, seething a shadowy mist.

Its face was a shifting scarred horror. Something beyond knowledge. If a mortal gazed at it they would leave with little impression of it at all—just the abject fear, the hopelessness it left behind…

The only other thing they'd recall were its six crimson eyes. Staring, staring…

Gilgorath (Monster Emperor)
Essence Level ???

They called this Monster the Chained One. And it was bound here by Aiwe, creator of the system himself. But that might as well have been an eternity ago. Back then its restrictions were so fierce it could

not even think. They had weakened greatly over the eons.

Especially now, as they approached the peak of this Chaos Cycle. When monstrous powers were rising like a new moon, when the System was at its weakest—when the time of the Jailbreaks, the Monster Waves, quickly approached…

Not only could this Monster think —it could also see. Its enormous soul had gained enough freedom to communicate. To have some influence over its bindings, its prison.

Right then its six eyes were closely monitoring thousands of realms at once…

but one in particular concerned it the most.

It watched as a certain big man defeated the Knights it had sent to crush him.

Not just defeated. Destroyed so badly it genuinely stunned this Monster.

The scene vanished and its red eyes flickered, blinking.

Then they narrowed all at once.

A furious hissing echoed down the space. Gaping voids tore open all over—

The runes on that white pillar flared bright. An absolute power, an echo of long-gone will, washed over the room, reverberating like a struck gong. Reverberating through every last particle of this Monster; for a second it flickered, its very existence in this reality destabilized. It jerked as though struck, settled down…

Its eyes stayed narrowed.

It was furious. It was also concerned.

It was very rare that it felt this way about a candidate. Just a handful of times every Chaos Cycle—and those it did not manage to kill would invariably become a true powerhouse of the Galaxy, a pillar of the forces of Creation…

That could not be tolerated.

It saw just how fast Zane Walker was growing.

More than ever, it felt a certain conviction.

Zane Walker must die.

But how?

It quivered there thinking. Most of its powers were bound so many times over it was hardly worth considering them. Even its soul didn't have much reach…

Every Monster it had brought to kill Zane had failed in spectacular fashion. And if it tried bringing some of its Lieutenants from its deeper floors—creatures sure to kill the meddlesome upstart—it would be too big of a splash. The System would take note.

Gilgorath could not afford any more failures.

There was a simpler way. A sure way.

Its eyes curved to crescent slits.

It could slightly curve the trajectory of the staircase. To send Zane to a realm far deeper than intended…

Infernia. Birthplace of Demons. And the Chained One's own ancestral home. A place where it had tremendous influence—and oh-so-many great minions, eager to do its bidding…

It would send Zane Walker to a slaughter.

It let out a pleased hiss. And then began to work. Its six eyes narrowing as it carefully exerted its massive soul. Gently brushing aside the Superdungeon's thinning defenses. Pulling at its mechanics, nudging at the deep, immensely complex Laws that governed its inner workings…

Even making such a small change was a very difficult thing. It had to expend so much of its soul power it almost spiraled into a slumber once more.

But at last—it was done.

It let out a shrieking hiss. And its prison echoed with the sounds of its triumph.

***

Floor 36

At the end of the final section of a moss-riddled labyrinth, there lay a sandstone staircase. Leading deep into the floor below. Sands billowed out of it on scorching gusts, making little piles around the entrance.

But the way was blocked. A host of lizardkin and catkin ringed it, sealing it off.

Emeka Eze stood still in the center of the Boss Chamber. His honor guard tight around him. They had just finished off the Final Boss—at no small cost too…

Behind, more lizardkin, bear-kin, humans with red eyes shored up the exit. Hemming them in.

Not Monsters.

Thainish candidates.

"What is the meaning of this?!" growled Taiye, one of Eze's lieutenants.

"Isn't it obvious?" said the big Catkin at the front—Weereen, Essence Level 139. He let out a shrill laugh. "You've been had!"

His crew leered behind masses of sharp glinting steel. "Drop your weapons, your bags of holding, your armors, and you may pass. Come now."

Eze stared him down. "I refuse."

"Just as well," said Weereen, shrugging. He gave a sly grin, made a hand gesture, and his crew began drawing closer at both ends. Closing

the noose. “I must admit—I’ve told a little lie. You could never be allowed to live, Emeka Eze. Geld here—” He nodded to the ten-foot-tall hammer-wielding bearkin beside him— “Just so happens to be a high-ranked Earth-wielder too. And the Factions only have so many Essence Stones to go around, I’m afraid…”

They closed in.

Eze closed his eyes. Sighed. Took off his gloves, exposing raw knuckles. The Thainish kept coming. Closer, closer—

What happened next went very fast.

Bang. Bang. Bang—one after another. A dozen in a row. Softly, almost gently—the force of it somehow shivered the air, shivered the astral plane, like stones tossed into the grand pool of Fate, disturbing the waters…

Bodies dropped like sacks of potatoes. Dissolving before they struck the ground. No screaming.

Eze stopped moving, eyes still glowing purple, the vast image of a Golden Lion staring coldly overhead. Calmly, he took his gloves back out of his pocket. Put them back on in smooth, methodical motions.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Yes, Lord Eze!”

But before they could move, Eze’s pupils contracted slightly. He turned.

There, at the end of the tunnel, a cold air was billowing… and with it, Vanessa Volkova strode through. Her snow-white dress was stained with soot and blood. She surveyed the scene, looked at the mini-map, saw all the X’s…

“You ran into them too?”

“Unfortunately. And you?”

“Some of their top Rankers, a few bends back.” Vanessa shrugged. “We would’ve been happy leaving each other be. But they weren’t.”

Eze made a noise. “It seems to be the way of their Planet.”

They nodded to each other. And kept descending.

***

Evergreen Grove
The Temple of the World Tree

“You have a visitor, your Holiness.”

“Not now!” snapped Lan Arandor. He’d just finished watching Zane’s last battle. His face was set in a deep snarl. “Do I look like I’m in the mood for—”

“Your Holiness,” said the servant, cringing. “It’s… it’s Ancestor Eldrin.”

The Patriarch stilled. Paused. Closed his eyes, visibly restraining himself. Then, through gritted teeth, almost calmly—“Tell him I

would be delighted to have him."

A breath later, a tall elf crossed under the leafy arches. He wore simple dark-green clothes, the colors of deep old forests. His hair was bone-white, his eyes shocking purple. There was not a line on his porcelain mask of a face. He could have been thirty or a thousand years old; it was impossible to tell.

The bow strapped to his back, meanwhile, was pearl-white. Its string a deep gray, pulsing gently. The beast it'd belonged to had been dead thousands of years, yet you could still feel echoes of its power emanating, a steadfast aura washing out in waves…

Lan swallowed. That was the Colossus bow. Eldrin's fourth Spirit Weapon Augmentation was to remake its string from the tendon of a full-grown Titan Rhinoceros. One of a handful of truly legendary weapons in the Galaxy.

Just as legendary was the elf who owned it. Reality seemed to teeter slightly around him, the way fabric stretches around a heavy object. Lan stiffened to attention.

"Greetings, honored Ancestor," he said. He bowed. He gave a polite smile on muscles not used to smiling. It came out slightly off-putting. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I've come to inform you," said Eldrin, looking faintly bored. "That I am about to enter short-term seclusion. When I return, it will be as a True Immortal."

Lan's eyes widened. "Why—congratulations!"

Eldrin kept going as though the Patriarch hadn't said anything. "For these few years, I will not be around to supervise you. Or the matters of our house. I expect you to keep things in proper order. Should you permit our affairs to fall into disarray…"

The Ancestor shrugged. "You have many cousins. Siblings of surpassing competence. You are not so precious that you cannot be replaced. Do you understand?"

"…Yes, Ancestor," said Lan. His face twitched, but that was all.

"Good," said Eldrin. His eyes grew suddenly sharp. "And what is this I hear about this new Mistress Maker?"

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234. One Man Army (I)

Lan clenched his teeth. "It's been taken care of."

"How so?" said the Ancestor.

"Ideally she'll die in the dungeon," said Lan. "That remains the most likely possibility. If not I'll simply subdue her—just as I did the last Mistress. Plans have already been set in motion."

“You're confident in this?"

"Of course." Lan was sure not to hesitate. "There is only one rather large obstacle to eliminate for either to occur. The rest is relatively simple."

Eldrin Arandor regarded him with cold flat eyes. "You have free reign," he said at last. “Do what you must.”

Lan gritted his teeth. And nodded.

***

Superdungeon

Zane and friends headed down the staircase.

It was so hot they all began to sweat minutes in. The walls, the floors, slowly went to black. Like the stone had been baked so long it had lost all color.

There was a tangible feeling of despair riding the smoke that thickened the air—you could breathe it in, feel it dragging at your soul…

Reina was the first to notice something was wrong. She saw it in the density of the essence—it was far thicker than before. Far thicker than it should be. And the auras wafting up to them…

They were nothing close to those in Floor 62. She frowned. It didn't seem right that there should be so big a jump.

They kept descending. New fumes tainted the air, black, soot like, noxious. Whatever they touched hissed, started to melt. Even the stones, the walls, the floors themselves, leaving oily puddles all over. Soon the air was laced with this stuff. It was impossible to avoid breathing it in.

Then it tried melting Zane too.

Stabbing at his skin. Stabbing at his insides, a kind of acid-poison trying to tear him apart at the seams—but Zane was held together by stronger stuff than the walls, or the stones. It couldn’t touch him.

Except for the parts that were not so tempered. He felt it going into his lungs, sitting there heavy as boulders, searing him from the inside,

getting into his guts, stabbing at his heart—even going up his throat trying to get out his brain—it was everywhere.

Reina was on it fast, though. She cast a purifying glow on him. On all of them. A warm light that melted away the black, left him feeling like he'd just gone through a nice sauna. She kept casting and the glow suffused them all, a constant shield driving back the smog.

It would make healing a little harder for her. But she could hold it for a while, she said, brow knitted with the effort. It just took some concentrating.

Either they found some way to counter this stuff, or they made it through the floor fast. Zane didn't want to stress her.

And that smog was only thickening the deeper they went. Until—

you have entered:

Floor 72
Infernia

That came as quite a shock to Reina too—in all the logs she'd read, the staircases only went down one floor.

"Something isn't right," she said, biting her lip. She felt they were being messed with. Zane wasn't sure what to make of it.

There was only one way forward either way.

The staircase soon leveled out—and started going up. Breaking into a sooty tunnel. Arching toward the surface.

You could just about make out the sky—a blazing smear of bloody-red…

You have entered Section 1-1
Plains of the Endless Damned

***

The Barbarian Sage smashed his cask on his throne, sloshing yet more wine onto the floor. His cheeks had gone all ruddy—he was quivering in rage as he spluttered. "What in the Nine Hells is that?!"

"I'm not sure," said the Head Scout, frowning too. "That's… highly unusual."

"That's tampering, is what it is!" snarled the Sage. "Blatant tampering! Has the System fallen asleep?! Do your job, damn you!"

But other than shaking his fist at the sight, the Sage could only steam. At this point there wasn't much he could do.

"The aid's already been sent, right?" he grumbled.

"Yes, Sage," said the Scout.

He harrumphed. "At least it'll even the odds. It'd better get there in time. You know those bastards have got something nasty planned…"

***

The tunnel opened up into an abject wasteland. Soot, cracked

blackened earth roasted beyond all recognition, blood-red sky. Scorching heat-waves rolled across the land. In the distance they saw raging tornados—vortexes of molten-red fire and white lightning and soot—howling across the landscape…

It wasn't just the wind doing the howling. If you squinted you could make out hordes ghostly pale faces popping out of them, screaming before being dragged back in…

There were souls trapped in this soot too. At least, chunks of them. Zane could feel them in the Astral Plane—but he could also see them as he waded through it. Feel them reaching out with pale ectoplasm fingers, grabbing at his ankles—they couldn't break far from surface. Strange ghostly fingers reached out, grasped for the skies like some perverse grass…. Evan squeaked at the sight of them. Rivers of lava broke up the landscape.

Then there was the air. Infested with that strange rotting smog. There were gaping scars in the atmosphere, pure voids leaking tendrils of the stuff. Hanging there permanent. If you got too close it would start sucking in life force, draining at your Health fast. They gave those chunks a wide berth.

Fire, plus that weird element which Reina named 'Corruption'—she felt it was some kind of higher-tier Law—seemed to be the dominant elements here.

The land was strangely barren. Not a Monster in sight. The mini-map compass pointed them forward though. So they followed it. One direction looked much like another.

Zane wondered how long the journey would be. There really weren't many landmarks. A mountain range in the distance, bleak hills cut out against blood skies. The whole place felt like a kind of purgatory.

Then he frowned, stopped, looked up.

"What is it?" said Reina.

For a second there he swore he felt a gaze pass over him… saw some faint outline in the Astral Plane, some massive eye of the soul, staring down at him. It vanished as soon as he looked for it.

No one else felt anything. Not even Avery, which was unusual. Usually she was the one picking up on this stuff.

Weird.

They kept walking, eyes peeled.

Avery jumped a little when the notification came up. Then she actually read it.

Starting after the first staircase, Factions in the local galactic cluster will be permitted to send in aid packages to promising candidates. The candidate is allowed to receive one such package every twenty-four hours.

The first drop will arrive in twenty-four hours.

Oh, cool.

They kept going, trekking across this strange apocalyptic landscape—until Avery gave another start.

This time, though, it was for real.

She squinted, frowned. Then went quite pale. “Uhhhh,” she said. “Yeesh! That’s… a *lot*.”

She had detected some auras coming out east—a huge glut of them. They were still a ways off, hundreds of miles. But closing in at speed.

“What are they?” said Reina, frowning too.

“Demons. Er—at least two Monster Knights, and… I think they’re both over Level 300?” Avery shook her head. “They're a lot stronger than those chumps we just fought, that’s for sure.”

“Hmm,” said Zane.

“There’s tons of high-Level-200 Monsters there too. Demons. Gross-looking. Like really rotted dinosaurs that got reanimated.”

Apparently, those Monsters were definitely heading in their direction.

Reina wondered if they were tracking auras. Got Avery to try her best to cloak them, shoot off fakes, simulacra, to throw off the scent. They went another little while.

It did not appear to be working, according to Avery.

Zane thought he knew why. He looked up every so often—he could still feel that enormous gaze locked onto them.

It meant trouble. He had a feeling they weren't hiding from it no matter what they tried.

They would just have to up the pace.

Evan picked up Avery on piggyback. Zane carried Reina. They bolted for it, trying to loop around west, keep some distance between them and the Monster horde as they sprinted toward the next floor.

Soon, though—“Stop!” cried Avery.

She frowned West. “Wha the heck?” Then paled. “Huhhh?”

“There’s more?” said Reina.

“A lot more—another two Level 300-plus Monster Knights! And an army just as big…”

“…They’re trying to herd us,” said Reina. She looked worried.

So they would have to go due north. In the direction of the compass. And just try to outrun both armies.

“I get the sense that's exactly what they want us to do,” said Reina darkly. She wasn't sure they had a choice though. Wherever they went it seemed like that eye could find them. If these things were going to catch them eventually, might as well be as close to the exit as they could be.

She didn't like it. But it was looking like they had to go for it. She

just suspected they would find a nasty welcome once they got there.

There was a silence as they all chewed over that thought.

Avery tried to lighten the mood.

“Well,” she said at last. “It doesn't matter how many of those things they’re throwing at us! We’ve got one Zane! Right big fella?”

And she gave him a slap on the back. She was less confident than she sounded. Zane understood. Every 100-Level bottleneck was quite a big jump. They had never faced a Level 300 before—much less several. If something like that awaited them…

None of them were very confident.

That was fine. He would be confident enough for the rest of them.

“Leave it to me,” rumbled Zane, nodding. “It will take a lot more than that to bring me down.” He said it like it was a simple fact.

They were still a little nervous. But they believed him. They kept moving.

Sure enough, not half an hour later—just as they were speeding down the slopes of a dusky mountain range into the soot-stained valley below…

Avery cursed.

“Incoming,” she said. “Out in front…”

This time they could see it. A line of black cresting the distance, flashing white, like storm clouds approaching…

It was looking like they couldn't avoid a fight, Reina thought.

“Then we won’t,” said Zane.

Reina hesitated. Then nodded. She felt it was the best way too, strategically. If anything, it would be better if they took this head-on—if they could break through the army ahead, and outrun the ones coming from the sides. If they got caught between the three of them it would be the worst of every world.

So they put Zane as the battering ram. Out in the front.

There was only one problem with the plan. Zane’s strongest weapon was still his Chains—the only ones that had gotten a full upgrade, with new special Skills. But they were a one-on-one tool. To take out an army, he needed something for the masses.

And he had just the Skill.

He had never used it with his new Core. Or his new Weapons. Or his new Stormfire.

“Stay back,” he told his friends.

This one took some time to get going.

***

The Demon army was all rotted corpses, black-and-white—enormous bones sticking through black rotted skin, black rotted muscle. Shambling creatures. Dripping, oozing corruption. They conformed to no recognizable shape—stitched together of many

different giant animal-parts, dinosaur-tails here, bat-wings there, Franken-creatures, some on two legs, some stumbling on three, four, five…

All were massive, though. All heaved fiery essence and tar-like corruption. All had the same red eyes.

Corruption Demon
Essence Level 280

Dozens of them. Slobbering, dragging themselves on, moving at speeds that belied their shambling awkward gaits.

At their fore were two Monsters. Both Monster Knights. These were the only creatures that vaguely resembled animals—the first, a giant spider smoking with corruption-shadows. The second, a mammoth laden with plates of dense bone, a natural battle-armor. In the Astral Plane both burned far brighter than anything else there—their warped souls woven deeply into their warped flesh…

Nascent Soul beasts.

Blitz tornados, all soot, fire and fury, ran the distance, greedily sucking souls straight out of the ground. They matched the mood of the marchers. A great hunger simmered over them all…

Then this giant procession halted. Puzzled.

It seemed there was foul weather on the horizon.

A tornado was drawing closer. Bigger than any they had ever seen. So close it was starting to snatch soot-clouds out of the sky—so close they saw it drawing in other tornados, burning them up, using them as yet more fuel—

Its essence was unusual. Not just because it was far more than a tornado should have.

The color was a piercing blue-white.

It crackled. It boomed. It rumbled. Burgeoning at a shocking pace. But most of all it shrieked. Not the shrieks of souls—but of very heavy things, slicing at vast speed through still air…

It ran straight into another tornado. For a second the explosion lit it up bright—and in the light they saw the silhouette of a man. Well-built, swirling chains clenched in his two fists.

A man coming straight for them.

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235. One Man Army (II)

The super-tornado was picking up speed. And as it moved, it shook the world. Wrestling streams of souls straight out of the ground. Curving the flows of the very atmosphere, sinking sooty clouds, making all the other fiery tornadoes tilt toward it, falling helplessly, erupting in columns of shocking light. Swallowed up by greater fire.

And it burned ever brighter.

The Monster horde stood still. Mesmerized almost by the sight of it.

Then the ground began to rumble. Began to crack—and it settled on them that this force of nature, which had been this distant phenomenon, was coming upon them incredibly quickly. Not only because it was getting closer—it was growing bigger too. And soon they felt the pulls on their own frames, felt a hot crackling current sizzling down their skins…

The demons' at the front line began to shriek. The whole line wavered, threatened to split.

Everywhere air began to bend. The skies shivered, as though about to cave in. And all the while the roaring only grew louder and louder, drowning out the world, throwing searing blue over all there was…

The Monster Knights, though, did not move.

This, they had realized, was the work of their prey. A mere Core human. It looked flashy from afar—but they did not believe it could threaten them. They had their pride.

They snorted. Hunkered in. Shrieked commands at their armies. And the rest of them formed up, glomming together, making a wall of pure Corruption. A purple-black haze sweeping over them all, offering a gruesome protection.

The Monster Knights both started seething dark essence. Started sinking into the ground. The giant spider oozed thick oily liquids out of so many pores, linking to make a swirling shield, coating its enormous body. The Mammoth's bones began to shine—in the physical realm and in the Astral Plane—twice as bright as those lesser Monsters beside it…

Greater Blight Spider (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 310
Greater Blight Mammoth (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 306

These Monster Knights had refined souls, Nascent Souls. Woven

into their physical forms at the deepest of levels. Inseparable. Existing as much on the physical plane as the Astral.

Which meant the essence they could project through their bodies was unlike anything their Core brethren could fathom.

Still. Even they—looking up, watched as the tornado drew near just seconds off. Seeing it levitate whole mountains of soot off the ground, seeing those swirling Axes, twin beacons of light, crashing through air, streaming storms of essence…

Even these Nascent Soul Monster Knights felt niggling doubt then.

Was this man truly merely one Core human? The amount of aura driving at them felt like that of some great army, thousands strong…

And at last a Bloodline billowed out of it all—the image of a beastly Rhinoceros, charging with the tornado, roaring, flickering high overhead—

And one charging man collided with a demon army.

Death came in many forms then.

The explosions at the moment of contact. Chain Combustions, so much swirling essence slicing in at such obscene speeds, igniting all matter they touched, all souls they touched—

Shrieks lit the air.

Firebombs of Stormfire crashed through the army, running long shining lines through the dark masses, voiding huge chunks of them, leaving nothing but ashes in their wake, corpses blowing away in the scything winds—

And then the natural disaster that was Zane Walker had arrived in the midst of them. Burning with so much essence, so much Bloodline, so much raw heat and vigor and power he seemed a supernova crashing to ground level.

The first line of demons went flying—all at once. Rammed off their feet. Spinning, howling, desperately clawing at nothing, sucked into the vortex where they vanished into flares of brilliant Stormfire—

And the axes were among them too.

SCHLUNK-SCHLUNK-SCHLUNK!

Rotted necrotic heads spun into the breeze, gushing fountains of hissing black blood. Claws flailed into the distance as demonic bodies were crushed, bisected, ripped open at every conceivable joint—random shattered limbs flailing through the mess, burning up in showers of Stormfire. Swathes of demons were shredded all at once—scattered like they'd been thrown into some great meat-grinder. Bloody tongues wheeled through the air, thrown out from burning husks, shriveling up as they flew…

There was a huge grinding sound. A ripping. The crisp shrieks of steel splitting bone, skin, all manner of matter, splitting the very air—

a great heaving, a crashing, a booming, a flood of violent sound, of shining light and essence all at once—

It was Zane at his finest. The very essence of him, set on fire. A hot-blooded machine of pure destruction, running up against that looming black wall of an army…

High Core Monsters perished in their dozens. The next few dozen became unwilling sacrifices—swathes of thick bone and tendon and muscle, donating whole skeletons just to slow Zane's fury. Little more than fodder.

Slowing him was all they could do.

He was still running white-hot, Asura aura skying to the horizons as he crashed over the two Nascent Monster Knights….

And there came one final explosion. The biggest of all.

And at last, Zane was forced to a halt.

The explosion took everything out of him. Tore massive yawning voids open in the middle of the realm.

The explosion was so powerful the man himself went stumbling back, bellowing furiously. So powerful it swallowed all the momentum, all the energy, completely…

At the end of it, Zane was on one knee. Panting heavily.

All around him lay a scorching wasteland. Shakily he stood.

The Mammoth lay before him. Tongue lolling listlessly. Its massive red eyes stared him dead in the eyes.

Then they began to roll back.

And its skull came apart right down the middle. Shattering in real-time. Falling away—just like the rest of its bone-armor, giving way to the inconceivable force it had just absorbed. And Zane saw his Axe embedded deep in its ruin of a corpse.

The whole thing erupted in Stormfire. Chain Combustions lay waste to it. Exploding it even as the two halves crashed heavy to the ground… and that was all.

A Nascent Soul Level Monster. Crushed in one brutal blow.

***

Only… that killer blow had taken everything Zane had.

He was on his knees, heaving in deep breaths, glistening sweat all over, matting his hair.

His eyes were still burning, though. He could still hear the thumping of his heart—at a lower intensity now, struggling for fuel. Zane's Asura state granted him a tremendous boost in power. But it was also tremendously intensive to run. It took not only his essence but also his bloodline, his body—every aspect that made Zane himself. Even his soul.

It left him lightheaded. Feeling drained in every possible way...

Next to the mammoth Monster knight lay the giant spider. And it

had taken Zane's other Axe.

He had gotten up well past twelve revolutions—it might have been the most he'd ever done. And the force of it showed. It'd crushed half the demon's head in, lopped off a pillar of a forearm. The Monster Knight was teetering, its exoskeleton burning...

But its three of its red eyes still shone bright. It clung on.

It still thirsted for his life.

In the meantime, the slag all around Zane began to shift. More survivors making themselves known, two, now three emerging from the wreck, hobbled but seething for revenge—now a fourth—

Zane closed his eyes. Dragged in a deep breath.

With how spent he was, he would like to have wrecked them all then. It was that Nascent Mammoth—it had taken a huge chunk of his powers before succumbing, an almost unreasonable chunk. It felt like trying to break through tempered steel if the Core demons were plywood. A different quality of creature altogether... but that was Nascent Soul for you.

It was still not enough to stand up to Zane's firepower. But it had ground him to a halt. And that was its purpose served.

Now the other demons circled him again… drool dribbled from broken gnashing teeth…

Zane growled. Reached for his Bloodline. Came up empty. Reached for essence, and could hardly find a drop left. His head pounded awfully; every limb felt anchored in heavy steel. He was not used to feeling so heavy.

He only had one thing left to him.

His fighting spirit.

That raged as hot as ever… and that would never run dry. The final fuel of his Asura State, shot his aura high, wide and fierce—and in the end, it was this that gave him the strength to stand. To stand, and face his enemy.

So long as that remained his Asura State had at least some fuel. So long as his heart was still beating, then. He could go down swinging with at least this much strength.

He looked around. Stared down the beasts. Stared down the Monster Knight, Level 310, limping toward him—and felt how much essence it had in reserve. Still a huge quantity. They were on opposite ends. It was broken, but it still had so much fuel. Zane was empty. But untouched.

Not for long, it was looking like. The other demons' jaws began to unhinge, black blasts shooting out—

It took a massive effort just to crouch then. Readying to spring away.

Then mirrors popped up all around Zane. Catching the gunk-blasts

—rocketing them back, smashing straight into the demons, scalding their own skin. They screeched.

"Hang tight, big fella!" cried Avery.

At the same time, Zane heard Evan give a little battle-cry—and the boy rushed in in a stream of golden light. And began whacking.

The lesser Monsters were forced to turn to face the new threat. Zane stood there grateful.

But there was no time to focus on all that.

The big one was still rushing straight at him. The Monster Knight. Blurring across the landscape at a speed something so big should not have been capable of. A dark star exploding corruption essence—fangs dripping with oozing reams of it—it felt manic, deranged, as it descended screeching upon him.

At the same time, Zane felt Reina come near, throwing regeneration at him. Letting him know she had his back.

He snarled. Braced.

And the massive demon crashed into him.

Then it felt like he'd gone back to the very beginning—right after the Change. When he'd had nothing. He was so burned out he couldn't summon a thing. No essence, no Skills…

He only had his fists and his Axes.

He wielded them with a fury.

It rammed him—and he went head-over-heels; it felt like he'd been struck by a freight train. He felt two anchors sink deep into him, drilling into his midsection, burning deep inside—spearing them straight through. Those massive mandibles. Injecting oozing tar globs deep through him—

Zane bellowed. And smashed, and smashed, and smashed big fists right over its wreck of a head. Yanked back his chains, drilled an axe head deep into its exposed skull where Stormfire still burned in waves —

It was absurd how resilient this thing was. Even as he crushed out gobs of brain, it still fought. Something about that soul, woven deep into its body, meant it could keep going.

The Monster Knight let out a terrible shrill cry. And they went tumbling over each other. Biting. Crushing. Grappling to the death.

For the first time, Zane felt the difference between Core and Nascent. It was clearest in the essence—that power could match Zane's own. Zane's was more pure, more dense… yet there was a difference in the quality when it came to Nascent Essence. A difference in how bright it could burn…

All that essence injected the deadliest poisons Zane had ever encountered. Deep into his guts.

Zane's body was made of strong stuff. Even without essence, his

muscles, his bones, his tendons could fend it off. In the Asura State, his body's vitality coursed with new energy, boosted fiercer than ever…

His organs couldn't take as much, though. The stuff went everywhere—

And it burned. Shot a pain deep into him—a pain so intense it would have shattered nearly any human mind in an instant, sent them spasming and frothing—

Even Zane had to groan.

It only pissed him off more.

He started wrecking the Monster Knight with renewed vigor. They were so close now, pressed so tight, he could make eye contact with each of its bloody eyes as he crushed them one by one, staining his fists bloody—

Warning!
Health under 75%!

Those big spidery limbs had wrapped around him. Stabbing into his back. His arms. Bleeding him all over. Pumping poison into him every which way—he could feel its furious intent, hear it screeching oozing black spittle even as he bashed it in—

Neither of them had any intention of stopping. Not until the other was dead.

Health under 50%!

He felt the Spider's disbelief then—its few remaining eyes popping… it had pumped him full of enough poison to bring down a Godbeast Elephant.

Yet he was still bellowing. Teeth clenched painful-tight. Smashing in fist after furious fist…

In the end it was the one that went limp.

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236. The Third Concept (I)

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 255 -> 259

So much essence rushed into Zane at once he felt his Core flexing, expanding with his new capacity. It was a rare thing to feel it—it spoke to how much he'd gained.

He would need every bit he could get.

It was bigger. But still mostly drained. It would've been nice if he could use Leveling essence to refill himself. But to fuel his Core he needed his own essence.

He was satisfied, if spent.

It would be a little while yet before he was back to fighting shape—and not just because of his essence situation.

His soul was still exhausted, but more—he felt a dizzying spike of pain, enough to make him hiss. He examined himself. And found a nasty surprise waiting.

Splotches of corruption ran all through him. Staining his muscles, his organs—especially down the middle. His midsection was splotched black all over, an oil spill in the Astral Plane…

Reina rushed to catch him—threw on regeneration. Cleansing him, burning it away, slowly stabilizing him. It still felt like it was burning holes inside him. But she quickly got a handle on it. It was Nascent essence. It would take a little while to melt, it looked like.

He didn't feel like he would collapse at any moment anymore. Even though dizzy spells kept smashing him over the head. Like deep hunger pangs but for essence. He took some elixirs… it would still be a while.

Frowning, he pushed himself on. "S 'go," he said, and was surprised to find himself slurring. He blinked.

Maybe he was more tired than he thought.

But they had to go on. The other Monster hordes were still at their backs, gaining ground. So they went.

***

Same situation. Zane and Reina as a pair, Evan giving Avery a piggyback ride—and they were making good progress, Reina thought,

which was the first good news Zane had heard in a while.

She had them run slightly diagonal for a bit. Then back to their original path, noted the change in the angle of the compass on the mini-map, ran some ballpark figures in her head to figure out how far they had to go. Evan asked her what Skill she was using, and she said "Math." It blew his mind.

With their pace of travel, she said it would take two days until they got there.

They would have to hold out until then.

Avery guided them—trying to weave them between Monster armies that somehow kept cropping up in the distance. Their little crew ran faster than any individual army—they just had to keep going around them, which felt, according to Avery, like playing the world's most high-stakes game of Pac-Man.

"Lucky for you," she said proudly. "You stand in the presence of the 7th place finisher in Division C of the 2022 Greater Seattle Area Pac-Man Championships!"

Evan gasped, asked how many participants there were, and she hastily changed the subject.

There was an absurd amount of strong demons here according to her. Crawling hordes of them. They traveled in packs though. And this place was enormous. So it was still possible to skirt them. For now, at least. While the net was still closing…

Zane figured it wouldn't be too long before he would have to fight again.

And he could do it. But he was also a little concerned that first army would not be the worst of their troubles here.

If they somehow had to take more than that—maybe three Nascent Monster knights or two armies at once… he felt like he was fighting the world.

To do that he needed more firepower from his body. Which was something he seldom thought. It was true, though. He could not crush just one. He had to crush them all.

They skirted Monster hotspots ran around lakes of boiling corruption fields of corruption scars staining the air… and at last came to a rest.

Evan was pretty pooped. He had been running all day. Zane could run a while longer—especially now that Reina had cleared out most of his corruption. But he had made the decision to stop.

Reina wasn't doing too well, even though she kept denying it. He knew her. She had dark circles under her eyes—she looked a little sleepy. She was running low doing all this healing, while also warding off the very air in this place. She'd done a lot.

Sure enough, after they stopped, she kind of slumped into Zane, on

the verge of passing out. He fed her a healing elixir, let her rest on him. She started murmuring a little as she drifted off.

They settled in an empty stretch of plain. Cracked black ground stretching far as the eye could see, curving around boiling tar-lakes, broken up by forks of bubbling hissing lava.

They put enough distance now according to Avery that they could afford to take a little breather. At least for a few hours—maybe a night. Which did happen here, though there was no sun and no moon that they could see. Just the color of the sky, going from blood red to bruise purple, and staying there a while. No stars here either. Nothing to make a wish on.

It was a chance for them all to take whatever treasures they had brought to replenish themselves too. Avery had packed some sushi, Evan cookies—all equivalent to Earth-grade essence treasures. They took Level-up treasures too.

Zane took out his two new Nascent Monster Weapon Souls.

Both pitch black orbs with maroon splotches swirling angrily over their surfaces. More dense by far than any others he'd come across… each had well over two million souls.

He took them in.

Level up!
Weapon Soul 6 -> 7
At this Level the Prometheus Chains' durability and strength is equivalent to Epic Sky-grade Spirit Steel.

He almost didn't get it, to his surprise. Weapon Soul levels were getting a lot harder to come by. His Chains' colors only seemed to grow more intense with each Level—deeper blacks. Purer. Shining that much brighter in the Astral Plane.

They all sat there, roasting essence-infused S'mores around a small fire, darkness swaddling the world around them. Broken up by rivers of lava snaking into the distance. Elixirs ingesting away inside all of them. They readied themselves for a new day...

Zane was just about recovered, soul-wise. He could do with some comprehension, he thought. It would take just a few hours to make a breakthrough. He had his eye on the Vital Organs bit of his Bloodline. He wasn't sure what upgrades that meant. Maybe his gut, or his heart? Whatever it was, he needed more power.

In the past, he had gotten a lot of defense out of his Titan Rhino Bloodline. As well as physical power, the power of the body. That he did not lack. When he was fighting armies a realm up, though... he found he needed his essence to put in more work.

Just then—

"Look!" said Evan. He pointed at the sky. "It's a shooting star!"

Zane frowned, looking up, pretty sure they were under attack somehow. Avery did too. But there was no soul there—and the thing on the mini-map, moving fast toward them, was yellow. The color of treasure.

High above, a stream of white light… it really did seem like a shooting star.

In here?

"The System said something about aid arriving in twenty-four hours?" mumbled Reina, still sleepy.

Sure enough, that shooting star came closer and closer, trailing a sparkling stardust trail utterly out of place in this hellscape—and ended up dropping right in front of Evan.

Evan gasped, picked it up—then showed Zane.

A tome bound in gold plate. Even the pages were written in gold; the letters streamed sunlight. It was a new Skill manual from a Faction called "The Constellation Order," apparently one of the Nine Great Factions. The Light one. They gave him something called 'Solar Flare Sword'—it was the next evolution of his laser-beam Skill. Its rarity was Earth (A).

The highest any of them had ever seen.

Soon another dropped down. This one came for Avery. She thought she'd been pranked at first—it looked like just a vial of water—until she read the description, and found it was 'Mt. Tai Spring Water,' also an A-grade item. It granted a special essence boost to those with Water affinities.

She started chugging hers happily.

Which left Zane looking up too, curious. He knew some Factions had an interest in him.

And sure enough… His shooting star came too. A good deal thicker than the ones that flew before—and it landed softly in front of him. The light faded out, revealing the treasure.

It was a violet flower.

A beautiful thing. The petals were made of what looked like liquid light, sizzling and gently crackling, somehow holding form. There was a little sun suspended in the center. Shimmering white-purple.

A single candle-flame of Stormfire. And just that little fire flared so powerfully it commanded its own space, a soft sphere of lightning color.

Not any Stormfire he knew—far stronger. Its aura was blinding in the Astral Plane…

Greetings, Zane Walker. This treasure comes courtesy of the Azure Flame Faction out of recognition of your great promise. It is the most precious foundational treasure on the Path of Stormfire.

Huh.

It is the highest-grade item we could send, taken directly from my Master's vault. Besides its main effect, the True Stormfire within should also expedite your comprehension of the next Stormfire Concept—and thus allow you to attain Mid-Tier Fusion.

Taking this treasure will not interfere with any prior affinities or Bloodlines you may have ingested.

—Sage Burnwater, Outer Martial Elder

Zane inspected it, curious.

Plasma Sunflower [Earth (S)]

Ingesting this plant remakes the wielder's meridians, granting them S-tier affinity to all Plasma essence, which is the essence of Stormfire. Any such essence flowing through these channels will gain a 30% boost.

This seemed big. He had never felt such pure Stormfire in person before… he could feel it was chock-full of Concepts. Concepts far beyond him. Just waiting for his comprehension. It was mesmerizing in the Astral Plane too—strangely it looked the same there as it did here. Just clearer.

Zane was quickly revising his plans. He was pretty sure he knew what he wanted to do now.

It had been a little while since he upgraded his Stormfire. He had a feeling it would give him exactly what he needed. Especially once he absorbed this thing fully. 'Mid-Tier' Fusion… he wasn't sure what it meant. But he was optimistic.

He rummaged through his Bag of Holding and dusted off that old Stormfire tome. Same black leather, blue lettering. Eager to crack it open.

***

Reina's treasure was the strangest. It was a treasure that came in a comet just as bright as Zane's, which got them curious—and sure enough, it turned out to be an Earth A+-rank. It was something called a 'Great Sage Seed'—in 30 days, it would bloom into an S-rank treasure called the 'Great Sage Fruit.' Which was supposed to help Law comprehension a great deal. It was shiny enough.

Only… it didn't seem to have any uses right now. Which they all found strange. Reina started scrutinizing it. He wasn't sure what thoughts were running through her mind.

He asked them to keep an eye on him as he went to take in his flower. They nodded.

He brought it to his mouth, stuffed it in, and swallowed.

***

It was scalding. Even to Zane, who was better placed than pretty much anyone to resist Stormfire. But only for a second. It didn't taste like anything physical. Like he was swallowing sensations, pure heat, pure electricity, jacked to a ridiculous intensity. The very essence of Stormfire.

He still gagged a little. Then it was going down his throat. A setting sun in the Astral Plane...

It settled in the core of his body.

It didn't explode, like he expected. Instead, it dissolved—dissolved to streams so hot even his body had trouble tolerating them. They began to spread, to flow through his channels, carving scalding-hot paths… and where they passed they were scorched clean. Remade in shining purple light…

Instantly Zane started going red, breathing heavy. He began to sweat, breathe out plumes of lightning-filled smoke, sparks of purplish Stormfire dancing down, breath rumbling to the skies...

He felt it trickling up and down from his Core. White-hot. To his chest and arms—he let it do its work. The progress was very slow. But it would be finished come sunrise, he felt.

Until then... he took the highest-grade Comprehension treasure they had. A 'Draught of Clear-Seeing,' and cracked the Tome of Stormfire.

His body would be drenched in the stuff for the next few hours. He would make the most of it.

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237. The Third Concept (II)

The vision colored in—and there was Patriarch Azure Flame. Back facing him. Hands clasped.

"So," said the old man. "You've mastered Chain Combustion."

He turned, nodded, stroked a gnarled hand through his long white beard. "That happens to be the last of the Foundational Concepts of Stormfire."

His eyes flashed. "Now comes the true test. The Concepts that will elevate your Stormfire to a new stratosphere of power. The Concepts that opens the gate to Mid-Fusion!"

He paused. "This next step," he said slowly. "Is the critical juncture. Succeed here, and you have good chances of achieving full Mastery. Fail—and it is better you quit now. Forget you ever stumbled upon this treacherous path! Stormfire is not for you."

Weird thing—the Barbarian Sage said something similar. These old men liked to do this a lot. At this point Zane found it a little amusing. He stepped right over it.

The Patriarch took a deep breath. "Are you ready?"

Zane nodded.

"Then here lies the Concept."

And a new vision came to Zane.

The void of space. Glittering with distant stars here and there—mostly empty. Mostly black.

The main source of light was one glorious animal.

A Phoenix composed of all the colors of fire. The blue-white of Stormfire trailing from its tails. Its vast wings flaring yellow-red. Zane saw other kinds of fire flickering over its crown, over its back… whites and greens and blacks burning down its tail-feathers, each a font of vibrant color marked out stark against the darkness.

And yet each flame burned low. Like coals in a dying hearth. The creature moved slowly, shedding feathers, that smoked away in weak little embers…

"The Nine-Flame Phoenix," intoned the Azure Flame Patriarch. "One of very few god beasts gifted with the powers of Stormfire at birth. Along with two other Heavenly Flames, and six Great Flames as well. As Godbeasts go, it is the peak among the peak—Supreme-rank, rare as true Azure Dragons!"

They watched the beast silently for a bit. "This one has lived a very long life," said the Patriarch at last. A tad wistfully. "Its name is

Iohui… It has been flying since before I was born, making a regular journey across the galaxy, there and back. It crosses the Azure Flame Galaxy every so often, and we see it like a comet. Streaking across our the night skies a few years every millennia, before vanishing into the void. It has lived a full tenth of a full Chaos Cycle, if you can believe it… but at last, it is coming to an end."

He fixed Zane with a serious look. "Its rebirth holds the key to your understanding."

Iohui let out a mournful cry. Closed its eyes. And little rivulets of tears dripped out, going up in flames, each a different color.

The scene panned out. And there—floating before it—was a star. A red giant. Burning just as low as the Phoenix. Two celestial flames, burning at the end of their lives…

The Phoenix folded its wings. And began to dive.

Slowly it picked up speed, started burning hotter, its whole body flaring with brighter colors—making a meteor of its form, burning one brilliant streak through the desolate night. Each of its flames melding to a single color as its intensity ratcheted higher and higher—

And somehow in that moment—all its weaknesses, all its tiredness, its frailty burned away too. It kept picking up speed, reviving, intensifying, until you could hardly even see the animal anymore—just a flame shining brighter than any Zane had ever seen.

And there in the midst of it, he saw the Concept.

Flickering within. He tried paying extra close attention—it felt like staring into the sun. Except in the Astral Plane. It hurt him just to look at it. But he forced himself on, frowning. Concentrating.

He traced the arc of its fall—right up until it dropped through the surface of that Red Star.

Blipping into the vast heat. Vanishing.

There was a silence.

Then a shiver ran across the surface of that star, upsetting those molten seas, choking off tongues of solar flares…

And the whole thing began to collapse. The whole realm fluctuated around it, warping, destabilizing, as space itself was pulled inward—all manner of matter, of energy, collapsing—

Storm-like currents spasmed along the surface, brightening, heating up, falling in, erupting together, untold tons of molten steel and plasma and fire all imploding toward a single infinitesimal point—

As Zane stared, he felt something familiar. Something exciting. A realization prickling at the edge of his mind, like sunrise coming over the horizon—

He tried looking deeper. Marshaling all his focus, all his soul. Bearing down upon that point, just like everything else in the vision.

Tried seeing past the cracks in the universe, seeing its true nature.

He felt close.

And yet—it felt like trying to grasp a river with open hands. He kept coming close to it—then it'd slip away, and he'd blink, and find it had vanished from his mind. The pain was nothing to him. He threw himself back into it again, and again, tireless, each try only making him more eager.

Tongues of shocking flame rose. Waterfalled down the center of the star. Matter and energy in essence shrank in, and in—it didn't seem possible that so much energy could fit in such a tiny space.

That Concept came clearer than ever before…

Yet it hurt more than ever to try for it. His soul started to scorch. Started burning. Pain lanced white-hot between his brows. His teeth clenched hard.

He sensed he just needed a little more—just a little—

His body came back to him then. A cluster of sensations in the background of his mind—and he felt it in there too. Burning up his insides. Scorching them, cleansing them, fortifying them. Just as he felt it in the scene… the two made a harmony.

Stormfire flared bright in that star. Rushing to an extreme. White blue intensifying and intensifying and intensifying until it couldn't stand itself anymore, went off to some unknown spectrum—

And a new light flowed forth. A shining purple. Mesmerizing.

And a new cry issued from within. Not mournful. But joyful. Another Phoenix lifted off from the ashes of that dying star—a smaller one, a baby, soaring out triumphant, blazing pure purple… it vanished in a stream of light. Streaked into the distant void. And was gone.

Leaving behind only the impression of it. Shining in Zane's mind…

***

He opened his eyes at last. Took a deep breath.

His body felt scraped raw inside. He looked around, touched a hand to his sweat-matted hair. He seemed to be sweaty, red all over.

His head still throbbed awfully.

That was… painful. Surprisingly so. He had never been hurt trying to grasp a Concept before. But right now it was like he'd taken a bare soul attack. A soul attack he'd opened himself up to—where there was no defense.

He blinked.

The Patriarch hadn't been exaggerating, which surprised him. That was… not easy. It had punished him some. But it probably punished smaller souls more—they would take longer to get it. And expose themselves to that heat longer. No wonder.

He felt fine though otherwise—good, actually. Full of energy, pumped up. His heart was beating strong, his blood already running hot…

He searched inside him.

The Plasma Sunflower had done its work, burned out. His essence channels, were noticeably thicker and denser—and he felt new purple energies fused deep inside, like metals grafted into an alloy, making something far more robust… each channel pulsed hot now. Primed for new heat.

Affinity gained!
Plasma (S)
Concept comprehended!
The Concept of Extreme Intensity

Zane stood slowly, breathed out. And purple sparks flickered on his breath…

The sky was lightening. Going back from purple to red, he noticed. As close as it came to sunrise down here.

“Well done,” said Reina softly, one hand on his shoulder.

“Err—hey big fella?” It was Avery. She sounded rather nervous. “It's looking like we might need you soon. *Really* soon. Reina said not to disturb you, so we didn’t… but we could be in a bit of a pickle?”

“What is it?” he said, frowning.

He noticed Reina was already wreathed in essence and aura. Flowers blooming at her feet. Evan had his sword out, looking to the horizon, looking determined. Avery looked battle-ready too.

“We’re about to be under attack,” he said.

“There’s three coming straight for us,” confirmed Avery.

“Monster Knights?” said Zane. It was as he suspected.

“Monster Armies,” said Avery, wincing. “As for Nascent monster Knights… there’s, um. Four.”

Hm.

“What are the Levels?” said Zane.

“Low Level 300s.”

Zane stayed silent.

“We could go for the same strategy,” Reina said to him. “If you can break through the front, we can outrun them. Circle around the other armies—if we make a good pace we might be able to make a clean escape.”

She hesitated. Saw something in the set of his jaw. “Unless…?”

Zane shook his head.

He had felt the power of those Monster Knights. Felt the new power in his veins… and he felt very confident in what he was about to say.

"We are not running."

He looked her in the eyes feeling the bloody daylight slash hot across his face. "Do you believe in me?"

Instantly she nodded.

"Then stay by my side."

"...You're sure?

Zane nodded. She searched his eyes.

"Alright," she said, nodding too—it was good enough for her. And like that she was bought in. She had seen him like this before. Knew what it meant.

“So—just to make sure,” said Avery, voice a little high. “That’s *five* Nascent Monster Knights! And almost a hundred Core Monsters..."

“I know,” said Zane. “I’ve got this.”

“…” Avery blinked. “Must’ve been some upgrade, huh?”

“It was.” The image of the Nine-flame Phoenix still scorched hot in his mind.

“I believe in you!” Evan piped up.

Avery threw up her hands. "Ah, screw it—okay. Let’s do this! You’ve got that look in your eyes.”

“What?”

“That look,” she said, squinting at him. “Like stuff’s about to go down. Every time you get that look, stuff goes down.”

“Stuff will go down,” Zane promised.

"If we’re decided,” said Reina, looking over them all, “We should make the most of it."

And she brought out the treasures they’d been awarded at the end of the last floor.

Nuwa’s Elixir of Talent [Earth (B)]

The signature brew of the Grand Alchemist Nuwa, this Elixir sharply boosts one’s cultivation talent for a period of 3 hours.

They had two—enough for each of them to get a half brew.

Right—if they were to face down three armies’ worth of Monsters, they might as well get their money's worth.

They took out some glasses, gave each other little toasts. "Alright, team!" cried Avery. “Let’s get ‘em!”

They drank. The elixir tasted like crisp fresh air on a cold dawn morning. He felt it trickling down his throat, down his Core... and instantly felt hot all over. His Core started spinning faster. Suddenly hungry. Suddenly ready for lots and lots of new essence.

Zane clenched his fists.

***

It didn't take long for the demon Monsters to show up. They came from all sides, hemming them in.

The first came from the North. A wolf the size of a barn. It had no fur, just rotted skin leaking acid pus, patched through with splotches of pulsing dark energies. Its eyes burned furious purple. Most of its teeth were missing but the few that were left were big as scythes,

dripping pure black. Pure corruption. Smoke drifted from its ruin of a mouth...

Blight Wolf (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 312

And as it appeared, its brethren came with it. Lesser, smaller, stringier versions—though filled with just as much hate, just as much bloodlust...

Nearly at the same time, a second army. A seething mass—not one creature but a hivemind, a swarm of fat black bees, bellies sagging with Corruption. They had vicious stingers as long as fingers. Their drones drowned out the world, swallowed up all other sound...

Hive of Pestilence (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 306

And with it came hordes of gruesome creatures that vaguely resembled insects. Giant ants, spiders, bees, made of the same dark necrotic stuff, their shells split, pores oozing... corrupted. And somehow stronger for it.

The third army blocked off all escape. A reaper in tattered cloak, necrotic fingers wielding a wickedly sharp scythe rippling with Corruption. And a giant reanimated, stumbling up some seventy feet tall, hairless, nearly toothless, all blackened skin and sallow watery red eyes…

Blight Reaper (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 316
Netherworld Giant (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 317

Behind them trailed what looked like ghouls and zombies, splattered in tar, frothing at the mouth.

They had them surrounded.

They began closing in.

Zane took out his Chains. His Axes.

“Stay close,” he told his friends. In the eye of the storm.

The demons began rushing. From all directions. Corruption energies pooling in their mouths, their fangs, their stingers—

Zane’s pupils flashed purple.

And a new Stormfire flared to life.

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238. The Third Concept (III)

Stormfire poured down Zane's chains.

A purple so vibrant it arrested the eye, flickering, dancing, ghostly, shockingly bright. The sort of color you might see only in the most intense lightning storms—and only for an instant. Blazing at the moment of the strike before vanishing, leaving only a burning image in the mind…

Except here that color was held solid. Flaring in Zane's flame. As beautiful as it was savage.

It crackled and roared as it spun, raging as only fire could—and the sound crushed out the drones of the bug-demons, the growls of the wolf-demons—dominating soundscape, just as the flame lit up the landscape…

Skill evolved!
Stormfire [Epic (E) — Initial Fusion] -> Stormfire [Mythic+ (E) — Mid Fusion]

And that new Stormfire burned down the tips of Zane's axes too, slicking them white-purple—

Skill Evolved!
Stormfire Cyclone [Common (E) -> Mythic+ (E) II]

Zane narrowed his eyes. Clenched his fists.

And his Axes began to spin.

One.

***

Inner Reaches
Azure Flame System

The surface of Sage Burnwater's home planet was an endless plain of hot coals. Massive steaming lakes were interspersed throughout, making saunas hundreds of miles long. Fat white whales drifted lazily, venting steam which bubbled to the surface in island-sized blobs.

The Sage Burnwater himself sat in a cottage lifted a few dozen feet above a lake. Watching a scrying glass in rapt attention.

"Heavens…" croaked the Sage. "He actually managed it."

Burnwater knew exactly what it meant. He'd taken well over a decade to comprehend that Concept, and achieve Mid-Fusion. And he

was one of the greatest talents to grace the Stormfire legacy this Chaos Cycle. Most Nascent Cultivators never came close to achieving it—and Zane Walker was still at Core…

"In one night, too?"

Even with the Plasma Sunflower, Burnwater was struggling to think of any who could've done it that fast. The only two he could think of were possibly Sage Noughtfire—and the Founding Ancestor himself…

"Are you seeing this, Master?!" he choked.

There was silence on the other end.

Then—

"That is… indeed remarkable," said Sage Noughtfire. There was a faraway quality to his tone. Almost as remarkable as the sight before him—the old Sage had actually praised someone.

His surprise surprised Burnwater—"You were the one who suggested we send him the Sunflower, were you not?"

Burnwater had been hesitant. He had seen where Zane was going. The vast likelihood was the man would be long dead before he grasped Extreme Intensity. It would be a waste of one of Noughtfire's best foundational treasures.

But the ancient Sage had insisted.

Noughtfire said he had seen something in Zane. He didn't elaborate on what—you always got the impression speaking to him he had a hundred thoughts on his mind, but he'd only tell you one. If that.

Another silence from the old Sage. Then—"I did suggest it," admitted Noughtfire. "I… had not thought he would actually manage it."

They both just kept staring at the sight.

"…So," said Burnwater faintly as Axes began to spin. "This… Zane Walker. I had thought… somehow, I had thought the scouts were exaggerating, at the Auction… We may have to re-evaluate our assessment."

"Yes."

"This… this man is no generational talent."

"No."

"Once in a millennium? …Ten?"

Noughtfire stayed silent.

Then—

"If it were merely the talent of his soul," said Noughtfire slowly. "Perhaps. But from what we have seen of his will…that is the more impressive of his aptitudes. Put them together, and I'm not certain I've seen anyone like him."

Then it was Burnwater's turn to be silent.

At last—

"Nine Hells!" cursed Burnwater.

***

Zane's new Stormfire had a will of its own. Just like his old one—only it had gotten a lot fiercer. A lot more intense.

It wanted to bolt free to loose itself upon the world, to express its immense might in a wild reckless rush. Once it had been set in motion, it could only be tamed if you had the strength of body and will to match it.

Zane gritted his teeth. Started burning his bloodline instantly—and his Godbeast avatar flared above him.

He began exerting himself in full force. Imposing his soul, and his body. All at once…

Two.

It was a critical moment. And at the same time the first enemy shots came flying in—a flood of corruption energy, stinger-bolts and spells and harpoon-arrows streaming poison-shadows—all gunning for his head. Trying to throw him before he got started.

But shields bloomed over him. Reinforcing each other. Vibrant green swathes from Reina, covering him tight on one side. And mirrors on the other from Avery. They cried out, hard at work deflecting, blocking—holding even as dozens of Core Skills splashed all over them…

But they held.

He would trust his friends to get it done. Just as they trusted him.

So he focused on getting going.

Three.

And now the sketch of the full Cyclone was coming into view. Stormfire whipping into a fierce scything wind, catching vigorously, colors and sounds found only in the hearts of stars brought low to Earth, so hot the ground began to bubble…

The demons had just a moment's hesitation.

The wolf pack was first up. A seething oil-black tide racing straight for Zane—they stopped once they saw the fire. Once they felt the enormity of the heat they faced down.

Yet these were demons. They didn't think like normal creatures. Their fear was muted, their bloodlust amplified. Even then the sheer power rolling off Zane—power they could feel searing at their souls, watering their cracked eyes even from this distance, gave them pause…

Then the Monster Knight roared.

That massive Blight Wolf snarled a challenge. Urged its brethren on, imposing its feverish will on them.

And they threw themselves forward, mindless, growling, slobbering

pools of acid tar. Heedless. Lost to the frenzy… their sole overriding want. To tear Zane limb from limb.

But they had to make it through Zane's power first.

Four.

The air down here was well used to weathering firestorms. But even it started to catch. Started being drawn into the howling bulk… Zane bellowed.

The rest of the battle raged around him. To the left, a hail of Corruption descended—the undead army trying to distract him. Avery bounced those off. A few speedy insects tried dive-bombing him—Evan sniped those out of the sky.

Zane only had eyes for the impending collision.

The demon wolves had arrived. A noxious tide of flesh and spittle and so much corruption ooze—

But even as they came, Stormfires' purple light washed out their colors. He saw saliva evaporating from their lips, the water evaporating from their eyes—their skin glowing hot in the heat, starting to catch flame—they howled. Stumbled in.

The big Blight Wolf's intention was for his horde to crash into Zane's burgeoning Cyclone. To stop him cold. To make a logjam. Then the massive beast could leap over, and sink its teeth into him.

Instead…

It was as though each of those beasts had been lathered in crude oil. They hit Zane's wall of Stormfire.

And exploded. Without warning. In unreasonably violent fashion.

It was not a gradual thing. Crank Stormfire to a certain intensity and it would catch on anything. Devour it whole, erupting every scrap it could find. And keep burning. Fiercer than ever.

From Zane's perspective, those demons were undergoing a strange alchemy. He saw them hit the outer edge of his Cyclone. Their bodies touched the flames—and became them. He saw shapes rising, briefly howling—cut off abruptly. And then dissolving. Going to nothing in the space of a heartbeat.

His Cyclone raged ever-brighter…

Five revolutions.

Things were starting to get out of hand.

The big Blight Wolf, the Monster Knight, was entering the fray with a fury.

Its Nascent Soul was brimming with essence. Deep-set Skills packed its pelt. And its Bloodline ran at full blast; you could see a phantom wolf-pack hovering all around it, the shadows of its ancestors running alongside… It let out a howl that shivered the air. That carved out its

own pocket of dark aura amidst Zane's overwhelming tide.

Some Skill activated. And its body became a streaking black comet rushing and snarling, fangs hung wide open, shining with deadly intent—

Zane's Axe caught it right down the side.

SCHLUNK!

To the beast's credit, it made Zane's Cyclone hitch. Made it stutter.

Unfortunately for the wolf, it was only for a half-second.

Then its upper half and its lower half cleanly separated.

Black blood geysered out both ends. Its hindlegs floated away, burning up, lost in the mess—but its upper half was still going. Dragging itself forward, mindless, red eyes wild, pure animal demented fury…

It howled madly as it came. Evan and Avery rushed to intercept it—but they didn't need to.

Zane's Stormfire had never left it. They'd caught as soon as the Axe struck. And raced up its body. Arching for its throat, like some great flame-python, swallowing the Monster Knight in one big gulp…

Zane stared the beast dead in its eyes. Unflinching. Even as its jaw unhinged, threatening to clamp right over his head.

It fell for the last time mere steps from Zane's face. Slumping.

It was smoke before it hit the ground.

Six.

***

Extreme Intensity was obscene.

The Concept magnified Zane's power so much it was almost unreasonable. This building Cyclone was too much to sustain for him alone. He could maybe go seven or eight revolutions before he burned out.

Even where he was now his teeth were clenched hard, every drop of Bloodline burning, every inch of him straining to his maximum, straining furiously just to keep things steady—

Only right now, he didn't need to give all the fuel himself.

Those demons had given their corpses. That Nascent wolf its flesh—and his Cyclone ate it all up hungrily. And roared its approval as it thundered to new heights. Zane bellowed with it.

If they came at him they'd better kill him. Or they were only more fuel. They would only make him stronger...

His Asura State was burning to its peak. His Bloodline. His essence. His arms stretched taut, flexing with all their strength, linking in one great kinetic chain, down his taut back, his stomping legs as he heaved full-bodied, brought his Chains around for one more

revolution—

Seven.

The air began to crack, began to bend. The ground was making lakes. The lava-rivers themselves began catching Stormfire. Blazing purple, giving way to a higher flame…

Zane was peaking.

This could end only one way.

The other demon armies, the other Monster Knights, saw what happened to their brethren.

The Reaper and the giant zombie were reeling even as they charged. The hivemind was a cloud of shock to the other side.

One thing grew clear.

If they didn't stop him now... it was all over.

In a blink—an army of demons had vanished. Consumed by one man.

In a blink, it was the demons who were the desperate ones—were facing down a force far greater than themselves. They had no choice.

Three Nascent Souls—and hundreds of Core Demons, all at once, poured in their greatest attacks. Their last resorts.

Only one thought went through Zane's mind then.

BRING IT.

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239. Heart (I)

Their last resorts crashed all over him. Monsters firing up their Cores, firing off all the essence they could muster. A flood of demonic Skills streaming Tier 4 Laws.

The Monster Knights too. Raining strikes loaded with vicious Concepts—Melting, Corrosion, Decay. Blacking out the sky.

The insects spewed gobs of venom that merged to a waterfall hundreds of feet high—arching to the bloody clouds, then down over Zane's head…

The undead pumped their corpse-bodies full of demented Skills, transmogrifying, bone spurs jutting out of their skins, teeth elongating, sharpening, curving in their mouths, tipped Corruption-black. Bulging, blowing up. Some to nearly twice their size. And charging.

The Reaper wielded its scythe like a lance. And dashed in. The Giant lumbered after, boulder-fists clenched, rotting skin peeling off in the face of Zane's fire, as though badly sunburned…

But Zane could see them cringing even as they came for him. As though running up against a fierce wind.

They stood in the presence of a higher power.

It wasn't just the sheer amount of essence blowing out of him. It was his Law. Mid-Tier Fusion. It outshone every other Skill in the Astral Plane.

Taken together, fused to one raging Cyclone… nothing could match the intensity erupting out of Zane right now.

Darkness closed in from all sides.

For Zane it was now or never too.

He was cresting eight revolutions.

And it was starting to break him.

Even all the upgrades he had made to his muscles, his tendons, his skin, becoming nigh-indestructible at his power level—it was all struggling to hold up against the forces ripping through him. The momentum in his Chains right now ran so huge it ripped the realm as it moved, leaving jagged screaming voids behind…

Zane felt like he was single-handedly trying to hold two continents together.

It was excruciating.

The muscle fibers in his chest bulging, straining mightily—straining to the point of breaking—the tension, the heat, the effort brought to

bear upon him, ripping down the back of his arms, even as he fired every pulsing, squeezing muscle in his body to its very limit. Even as he tried forcing it all to hold…

He roared. And felt pain start spiking all over him. Muscles tearing at the seams—

Then there was Reina, right when he needed her. In came a sudden infusion of healing, a little extra right at the point of the wounds, stabilizing him. Just enough to hold him together.

Just long enough for Zane to make one more circle. And complete the ninth revolution.

Seas of darkness ran up against a world of light…

Light won.

Wiped out that wall of gunk. Wiped out that mass of bone. Washed over them. Blanked them out. A flat plane of purple-white. Nothing else existed then. Not even sound. For a second the seething purple white, almost too blinding to properly perceive, was all there was… and as Zane and his friends stood there, staring, it was as though they were standing in the heart of a star. Staring at a fathomless, silent immensity. Of light, of heat, of sound… washing over all. Consuming utterly. Absolute power.

They hovered in that silence for a moment. The silence of senses shot so high they went out of bounds. Simply couldn't comprehend what they witnessed…

This was Zane. All that he could do. Taken from inside him, thrown into the world…

Warning!
Health under 75%

Zane looked down.

Hm.

His chest. His arms. His back. It had all blown out. His skeleton itself—his tendons, his stubborn grip strength—was all that kept this immensity together.

His Health was crashing fast. It was all Bone now, and even that was groaning. If he held on any longer it really would rip him apart.

He let go. Wrapped his friends in his soul. And held on. Bit down.

An explosion flared out. Stormfire erupting with the force of an atom bomb…

Zane saw the notification.

Skill up!
Stormfire Cyclone II -> III
Stormfire Cyclone III -> IV

He was done.

He couldn't even think properly. His head felt very light, throbbing hot. In body and soul he had given it his all.

But just as he was about to keel over… he felt that big Monster soul in the sky peering over him again…

And Zane's head jerked up.

He glared right back at it. Teeth bared in a snarl. And spread his arms wide as he stood over mounds and mounds of burning corpses. The corpses it had sent to end him. The destruction he had wrought.

He thumped his bloody chest. Bellowed a challenge, defiant.

The eye stared just a moment longer before it vanished.

Then Zane swayed.

It was over.

He heard shouts, cries. He face-planted straight into Reina.

***

When he woke he found Reina looking over him as usual.

She smiled. And kept nursing him back. She got a little scared every time he went out, but she wasn't so worried anymore. By now he had something of a track record of pushing too hard and collapsing. This was just the standard protocol.

Besides—she only had to work on his soul. His body had healed pretty much instantly. Courtesy of—

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 259 -> 267

At first he was stunned at just how many notifications there were. He knew there were a bunch of armies. Hundreds of demons, and four Monster Knights. And yet… every Level was hard-won at this stage. You didn't just get eight at once.

Then he remembered Reina had thought to have him take that talent elixir too, right before the fight. Most of them multiplied his already massive essence gains.

He supposed it made sense.

He scratched his head.

He was just running through these upper Levels lately, wasn't he?

His friends were too.

It turned out Reina was now just a few Levels off of her Fourth Class Evolution. Avery too. They'd both jumped over 10 Levels in one

go. They were both eager to see what new unlocks they'd get—especially when it came to soul weapon upgrades.

Evan, meanwhile, had jumped all the way to Level 260.

They'd all had some time to process what Zane had just done. The crater around them was proof enough of it—a crater that stretched so wide you couldn't see its end, horizon-to-horizon. It had melted a good foot of ash—fused it so that the ground was now a hardened coal, streaked through with Stormfire purples…

The difference in power between Mid-Fusion and low-Fusion still astonished them. Not even those Nascent Soul Monsters had achieved it. Which meant Zane was already beyond the Law bottleneck to Nascent Soul, Reina thought. Whatever that was.

In any case, Zane wasn't sure he could do another Stormfire upgrade anytime soon. It wasn't so much the exhaustion. More that he had burned his soul pretty bad… he winced. It wasn't the kind of thing you recovered from just like that. It didn't hurt so much anymore—the way burn scars don't hurt after some rest. But it would be a bit until he could take more scorching.

Even he needed to rest sometimes, he found.

***

They celebrated around a campfire. A normal one, since Stormfire was a little too intense. Zane lit it with a finger.

It was pizza for dinner tonight.

Afterwards they settled down for yet another little break to make a few upgrades—Reina and Avery to see if they could breakthrough to the fourth Evolution. Zane, to take in those four new Weapon Souls.

After that last showing they weren't in so much of a hurry anymore.

Reina doubted they would be threatened much—in this section, at least. She felt it had been made pretty clear who was the 800-pound-gorilla here.

She gave him an affectionate nuzzle.

Zane blinked. Thought about it. Looked down at himself—just his body. Thought back to his thumping his chest earlier.

Hmm.

***

Steelheart Conclave

It had become a rather widespread rumor in the Steelheart Conclave that the legendary Barbarian Sage had staked out a spot in the Observatory. To watch just one candidate.

Soon the Sage got visitors. Old friends dropping by, fascinated. Sage Stonefish, an Inner Elder, was first—a plainly dressed martial artist, thickly built, with a sharp stubble and brutal features. He was a legend in his own right—slayer of the Monster King Xeraxes, the sole

practitioner of the legendary Buddha Palm Technique up to the Eighth Layer.

He was also a friend from the Barbarian Sage's youth. He never smiled, and seldom spoke—but when he visited he and the Barbarian Sage were like old drinking buddies catching up. They chuckled and clinked glasses.

The Scouts were astounded. They had never seen the stodgy elder so ruddy. They had only seen him at all in statues, or once every thousand years at the Faction-wide Millennium Ceremony… the Barbarian Sage had a similarly reclusive reputation, come to think of it. Seeing him and the Sage together was like seeing two mythical creatures at once.

“At first I thought you were blowing hot air,” rumbled Stonefish, shaking his head. “Heavens. This ‘Zane Walker’ may even reach Nascent here.”

“Can you imagine?!” the Barbarian Sage laughed. Then a thought seemed to occur to him—and instantly he was furious. “Those Azure Flame bastards… the nerve of them!”

“What did they do?”

He shook his fist at the ceiling. “They had the gall to plan ahead—and not send in their aid package last-minute, as I did! The System gave theirs out first!”

He snorted. “No matter.”

He settled back into his iron throne, took another swig. “Once mine arrives tonight, theirs shall be a mere afterthought.”

Stonefish wasn't the only one interested in Zane. The great talents of this generation were always looking out for the up-and-comers. A certain bald Steelheart Conclave Chosen wielding an iron staff big as a pillar sought news on this new recruit. So did another ten-foot-tall Chosen, a juggernaut with skin the color of silver.

Soon the news had gotten out to the regular Outer Faction disciples as well. News of a prodigy among prodigies, smashing his way through one of the most difficult Superdungeon paths ever undertaken…

Unbeknownst to Zane, his fame was quickly spreading.

***

It turns out Zane had been knocked out for most of the day.

Soon it came time for their next batch of action gifts to arrive.

It felt like forever since they came into this place and what seemed like an endless deluge of treasures. This Superdungeon really was as much a blessing as it was a curse.

… So far, more of a blessing than anything. Zane was making it that way.

Evan got a vial filled with Raijuu Bloodline, along with a very

sweet note from a Constellation Order Elder. “Aww!” cried Evan.

Avery got an A+-grade dose of ‘Mt. Tai Spring Water’ that would get her over the hump to the Fourth Evolution. They both dug into their gifts right away.

Reina, meanwhile, got an A+-ranked Skill tome called ‘Naiad’s Touch.’

Which was quite nice on the face of it—but Reina didn't look pleased. She already had a healing Skill, her signature Skill. And it was far better than what this one offered.

This time her eyes were narrowed. One dud treasure, she might be able to overlook. But two?

She pursed her lips. Zane got the feeling she would get to the bottom of this. She felt someone was playing with her.

Zane wasn’t sure what was going on. But he did know whoever was doing it was playing with fire. He knew that look on her face—she was starting to scheme right back.

***

Then came Zane’s treasure. A great silver comet arching halfway down the sky before it dropped right at his feet.

He wasn’t even sure what it was at first. Some great slab of muscle, dense as tempered steel. Suspended mid-air. But the aura coming off it was undeniable.

It was that of the Titan Rhinoceros. The single strongest source of Titan Rhino aura he had ever felt. Stronger than every Bloodline offering he’d ever seen…

Heartstring of the Titan Rhinoceros [Earth (S+)]

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240. Heart (II)

Heartstring of the Titan Rhinoceros [Earth (S+)]

A strip of the Titan Rhino's Heart that contains its vital essence. It can only be given willingly by a Titan Rhino to a trusted ally—and only once in its lifetime.

Then came another notification—a letter.

Greetings!

This is the Barbarian Sage. The one in your Bloodline visions—yes, that very one. I've taken something of an interest in your journey, Zane Walker, now that you've taken on my Path.

But you'll need some help. Humans, or being human, were never meant to take the full capacity of a Godbeast's Bloodline… you'll hit a hard limit around 64 drops! To expand beyond that—and to make your existing powers even more effective—you must take in the vital essence of a Godbeast.

This Heartstring contains just that. It will expand your Godbeast Bloodline capacity, and, as you gain more Bloodline, transform your heart—until eventually, it will be as though you were born with a Godbeast's heart. Vigor and power and all!

Take in this treasure, and you won't need to comprehend anything to gain Heart Tempering!

Now. I have had three separate associates of mine tell me I'm quite insane to be using such a treasure on some pre-Integration whelp—especially one stuck on one of the hardest Superdungeon runs in recorded history…

I told them to shove it!

Prove me right. I'll see you in a few weeks' time. Give those bastards hell!

Zane blinked at it.

What a nice message.

He inspected the Heartstring again.

How was he supposed to take it in? He thought about swallowing it. He dangled it in front of his face. It was the size of a belt.

He shrugged.

Then—just as he was about to open his mouth—he felt it resonate. Saw it begin to shine in his fist. Felt his Bloodline heating up, even as the Heartstring heated up in his hands…

Thump. The sound of his heart. Beating with a sudden urgency.

Thump. The Heartstring in his hands, suddenly bright with essence, with aura, with surging blood, like something ancient had been awoken just then…

The treasure vanished.

Then Zane felt it. In his own chest. There was a sharp lurch, like a white-hot stake was being driven through his heart—*THUMP-THUMP*.

Two at once, one an echo of the other. *THUMP-THUMP*. He groaned. Coughed out a mouthful of blood.

THUMP-THUMP.

Each heartbeat grew closer and closer, until—

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Two became one.

One heart that beat with the force of both. For a second it felt like it was about to beat out of his chest. He dragged in a lungful of air, feeling woozy, trying to steady himself. Waves of hot blood rushed through his head—

THUMP.

All of Zane's power. All of his feelings, his emotions, came from his heart. It was the workhorse, the great engine of his body. It gave everything its vitality, its power. It all came from the blood, in the end…

THUMP-THUMP.

Even at rest, just standing there. Chest heaving. He could see his breath steaming in the already-hot air.

His Asura state was activating. Just slightly. Outside of his control.

Then his heart began to beat faster and faster.

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP—

Zane had to sit down, close his eyes, sweat beading his brow. As new blood flooded through him.

Bloodline increased!
17 drops -> 29 drops

But the Blood was not the main prize.

His heart just kept hammering in his chest, louder and louder—and the air all around him began to steam. The aura blasting off him shot straight to the skies, shot far into the distance, billowing for miles…

His whole body began to steam. Veins standing out purple against his pumped-up muscles.

And now his Asura State was running near full-force. Even as he sat there. It hit what had been his limit—his aura…

And expanded. His Bloodline burned far faster, far hotter than it ever had—

Bloodline Capacity increased!

64 -> 128 drops

His head felt clear. Full. Rushing as though with a massive spike of adrenaline—coursing with sheer raw energy, carried on every drop of fresh new blood.

Zane stood then. He couldn't help it. He had to make himself go still. His fingers were twitching. He felt like a Rhino snorting, pawing at the ground preparing to charge—he ached to find the nearest mountain, rip it straight out of the ground, and hurl it headlong into the sun.

Skill up!
Titan's Heart I [Epic (E)]

Then instantly after—
His heartstring began to resonate.

Skill evolved!
Titan's Heart -> Divine Titan's Heart I [Mythic+ (E)]
Skill up!
Vigor of the Titan Rhinoceros (Passive) [Unique]
Grants a 40% Vitality Boost to the Titan Rhinoceros. A passive unique to the Godbeast Bloodline.

Zane remembered in his visions how hard it had been to take the Titan Rhino down. How kingdoms of elves couldn't do it, how it took that one over a hundred Levels higher to bring it down—and even then, just barely. How the beast seemed to have an endless wellspring of health. Deep in its massive body.

As he felt the energies surging through his body, it all made sense.

***

Inner Reaches
Azure Flame Faction

Sage Noughtfire watched on in silence. Sage Burnwater cursed up a storm.

"Has the Barbarian Sage gone senile?" said Burnwater. "A Godbeast's vital essence?!"

Burnwater threw up his hands. "We couldn't offer something better if we tried—that's the Superdungeon's treasure grade limit!"

"'Gone senile?'" Noughtfire said. He cocked a brow. "Or has he simply made an accurate assessment of Zane's potential?"

Burnwater stared. "You're serious. Aren't you always the one telling me that talent means nothing until it's proven?" he said.

"Usually," Noughtfire agreed. "Yet Zane Walker is a most unusual candidate.

Considering the reward… perhaps the gamble was worth the price.

He stroked his beard, thinking.

Burnwater could hardly fathom it. Coming out of Noughtfire's mouth especially—his master usually took pains to be conservative, skeptical.

"The Barbarian Sage means to snag him. If we are to match his offers," Noughtfire continued. "We must be prepared to offer something he cannot."

"Which is?"

"Stormfire, of course," snorted Noughtfire. "An expertise and treasury of Stormfire like nowhere else in the Dragonspire Galaxy. If Zane Walker can continue this level of performance—and indeed, improves on it… I will have to consider the possibility of offering to take him as my Direct Disciple."

That left Burnwater utterly gobsmacked.

Grand Elder Noughtfire was legendary. One of the most powerful figures not only in the Azure Flame Faction right now—but in all of its history. To become his disciple, you had to first rise to the cream of the crop in the Outer Faction. Then be promoted to the Inner Faction and rise to the top there too. Then be promoted to the Core Faction. And pray you distinguished yourself enough to be given the honor.

Burnwater had been a Sage before Noughtfire deigned to look at him. And even then—Burnwater was only an Honorary Disciple.

You could count Sage Noughtfire's Direct Disciples on one hand. Each was a legend in their own right.

"Master," croaked Burnwater, one cheek twitching. "You can't be serious."

To become a Direct Disciple of Noughtfire was to be on par in status with the finest Core Disciples of the Sect—only the Grand Elders, Ancestors, and Patriarchs would rank higher.

In fact, in the past, Noughtfire had only ever chosen from these Core Disciples. He'd never paid even the Inner Faction a passing glance. Not to mention the Outer. Much less some candidate still undergoing Integration!

It would flout millennia of decorum. It simply wasn't done.

"He hasn't even finished Integration—he hasn't even formed his Nascent Soul!" Burnwater protested.

"He has an exceptional Soul. A Seamless Core. A top-tier Signature Title. A physique incredibly tolerant of Godbeast powers… and most of all, a force of will like nothing I have ever seen. That man's potential is nigh-limitless."

Noughtfire threw up a hand absentmindedly. "Match the Barbarian Sage gift for gift, grade for grade," he said. "I will not lose out to him."

"…Very well, Master."

Here Noughtfire paused. “Though you are correct. Direct Disciple is a heaven-and-earth leap. As it is now I cannot offer it to him in good conscience.”

Burnwater let out a little sigh of relief. There would have been a minor riot among the Core Disciples—generational super-talents had worked millennia for such a position.

“First I must see one more thing,” said Noughtfire. He held up a finger. “I must see if he’ll condense the sort of soul I believe he is capable of.”

Burnwater hardly dared guess. “…A Sky-grade soul?”

“A Heaven-grade soul.”

Which left Burnwater speechless for the third time in as many minutes.

There were just two men in the entire Faction who had such a soul. The Patriarch, and Noughtfire himself.

Burnwater’s head swam. His Master was known for his wisdom, his discerning eye… and yet—this was plainly too much to ask of the big man.

***

Zane wasn’t done after the Heartstring. There was still more treasure to take in. His new Weapon Souls were first up—and after he absorbed them he got 80% of the way to the next level.

Not quite there. But he was already at Sky Epic. He couldn’t imagine a scenario where he would need more durability right now.

He burped, patted his belly. He kind of wanted to take a nap. It had been a pretty productive day.

Meanwhile, his friends were finishing up their Level-ups. He was waiting on Reina in particular. She’d been in striking distance of her Fourth Evolution, and she’d spent hours cross-legged, taking in one last essence elixir.

Then it happened.

Flowers started blooming over her head, linking to make a crown. Her eyes began to glow a pretty green. An aura blew out of her like a gust of crisp fresh morning air, sweeping back the smoke.

Zane felt a fluctuation in the Astral Plane, a stone thrown into the pond of the world, rippling fast. It was a similar feeling to when he’d gotten his Fourth Evolution.

Her Signature Title was Awakening.

She let out a gasp. Her eyes got a faraway look—like they were seeing something not-quite-here… a vision. A revelation.

It all faded. She dropped out of it wobbly, flushing. Looking stunned. She met his eyes.

“Heavens,” she breathed, wide-eyed. “Zane, it all makes sense now.”

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241. New Powers (I)

Zane could tell a lot of things were clicking into place at once in her head. She blinked, blinked again.

Then she started telling him all wide-eyed. She said she was meant to be the heir apparent of some very powerful Faction—the Temple of the World Tree. The same one that made all their elixirs. It was the privilege her Signature Title granted her. Once she 'Ascended'—that was, hit Level 500—she was meant to inherit the whole thing. She would be like their Matriarch.

She looked pretty stunned.

"Huh," said Zane. He scratched his head. "…Nice. Congrats."

He was kind of surprised. But it also kind of made sense. When he looked at Reina, he definitely thought she should be running important things.

Now it made sense why they wanted to give her an A+-rank treasure, Reina thought. She felt she was probably pretty high-ranked as a recruit, but she didn't think she was any better than Evan and Avery.

It had to be from the World Tree Faction—whoever was running it in her stead. They wanted to be seen to be supporting her, she supposed. Which was a strange way to put it, Zane thought.

She nibbled her lip, brow scrunched.

"Kinda weird treasure choices, though," said Avery. "Wouldn't it be more useful to get like S-rank essence elixirs or something? Maybe Law stuff?"

"It would, wouldn't it?" said Reina softly. Zane could almost hear the whirring going on in her head—she had realized something. She was cooking something up.

"I'll need to think on this," she said absently, tucking a strand of hair behind an ear.

Zane left her to it. He ambled off to take in some essence treasures, Level for a bit. She would take care of it.

****

A little while later, Reina seemed to have figured things out. She had her game face on.

In the meantime, she showed him what other upgrades her Fourth Evolution had brought. First, a new Soul Weapon—a staff, a length of polished warm wood braided over itself. It gave the impression that it wasn't crafted by hands but by nature. It ended in a gorgeous emerald

gemstone. A Weapon Soul. It granted her a 40% boost to all her Signature Skills. She already had the most potent regeneration Spells of anyone Zane knew. Now he figured she could contend with Nascent Soul healers.

She also got a new Signature Skill called 'Beloved of Nature.' He could feel her aura flaring when she activated it, a warmth washing over all. Where she stepped—the ground grew lush, flowered, even sprouting out of ashes and ruin. Everyone got a strong buff to their Regeneration.

She also got a new Summoning Skill—'Call of the Wild'. She could now call on nature spirits, spirits of Earth and Wood, to come aid her—they would ruck up the earth as they moved, causing little earthquakes and spiking forests of thorns into the enemy.

It was an impressive haul, Zane thought. Her Signature Title really had 'Awakened'—whatever she had, she seemed to be coming into her own. He was proud of her.

***

Evan worked hard at his Concepts. Avery was on the verge of her Fourth Evolution, chugging as many elixirs as she could. So did Zane. Reina worked on testing her new Skills.

It wasn't long before the day had passed.

The next drop was coming.

Reina suddenly came up to him, whispered some things in his ear. Just a few lines she wanted him to say.

He didn't think much of it. Just nodded.

"Zane?" said Reina all of a sudden. A little louder than necessary.

"What," said Zane.

She picked out the Great Sage Seed, looking puzzled. "I was wondering about the treasure I got from the World Tree Faction."

She started reading the description. The bit where it said it would bloom in thirty days.

"But thirty days… we might be out of this dungeon by then, won't we?" She shook her head. "Why would they do that?"

Reina was acting clueless, which was a very un-Reina thing to be. She seemed to be doing a thing.

He said his line. "Maybe they don't want you to get something useful."

"Of course not!" said Reina. She looked stunned just at the thought of it. "That can't be it… can it? Unless…"

She paused. Let it really hang there. Then—

"No—it can't be," she shook her head. "It must be that it's just the first of many—I'm sure they've got much more useful treasure coming my way!" She nodded confidently.

***

Evergreen Grove
World Tree

Lan Arandor's face was slowly turning white as he watched on. "What does she think she's doing?" he breathed.

The new Mistress kept talking.

"I'm sure they'll send me something very useful next time," she said, nodding. "Something that could power me up right now."

Lan stiffened.

"The nerve!" sneered Val Arandor. The boy had taken a break from his seclusion to come watch again—he had been hoping to see Zane crushed by that Monster army… And promptly gone beet-red when Zane beat then down with two big bloody fists. He'd nearly been about to cry.

"Oh! Zane?" said the Mistress, perking up.

"Yes?" said Zane.

"I forgot! They can see us and hear us, can't they?"

"Yes," said the giant.

She turned to the sky—to no-one in particular. "Dear World Tree Faction—I truly appreciate your last few gifts!" She said, smiling, the picture of innocent sweetness. "I can tell you're trying to support me. But they're not what'll help me most right now! What I could really do with is… oh—an S-ranked Vial of Nymph of the World Tree Bloodline? You must have some of that, being the World Tree Faction and all…"

"As if!" laughed Val. "Father, you ought to send her nothing—or better yet—"

"Silence!" snarled Lan, drawing a yelp from the boy. "She's doing it on purpose, fool!"

"Do you really think they will do that," said Zane.

"I'm sure they will," said Reina brightly. "I'm sure it was just an honest mistake last time. They just didn't know what'd help me the most! But they really care about keeping me safe—they keep sending me such high-ranked treasures, after all. So now that they know what I need, I'm sure they'll do everything they can to help out."

"Oh," said Zane. "Then I am sure they will too." The big man was painfully bad at acting.

"Mhm! I mean—if they didn't even now that I've made things so clear, then that must mean…" she blinked. Shook her head again. "No—I can't even imagine it!"

Lan gritted his teeth.

"Damn it all," he snarled. "She knows she has us!"

***

Evan got more Leveling treats. Avery, a bottle of White Fox Bloodline.

When Reina's next treasure came, it was on a comet as bright as any Zane had gotten. A vial stoppered in wood.

Nymph of the World Tree Bloodline [Earth (S)]

"That's what I thought," said Reina, head held high.

When she took it, on top of ten extra Bloodline drops, she Leveled four more times.

The Bloodline would let her refine her body, granting her a World Tree Nymph's powers—super-fast healing, immunity to all poisons, and the ability to cure nearly all poisons and afflictions at a touch. It made her flexible and resilient too, like a willow; she could take a lot of damage without breaking. It gave Zane some nice peace of mind.

Zane's treasure, meanwhile, turned out to be an Earth S-ranked Talent Elixir, courtesy of the Azure Flame Faction—they seemed to know he was exhausted Law-wise. He pocketed it. It would come in useful when they set off tomorrow.

***

To close out the day, Reina and Zane had a Leveling session deep into the night.

Level up!
Essence Level 267 -> 268

Afterwards they just lay there, her curled up happily against him, head on his heaving chest. Zane lay there a little sweaty, breathing heavy. She murmured to him, and wondered what would happen when they got out.

Zane hadn't given it much thought. Reina wasn't sure either—she still hadn't seemed to have fully wrapped her mind around the idea that she stood to inherit a whole Great Faction. She wasn't sure what they'd ask of her.

She did know, though—if they tried to take him from her, they would regret it. She growled that last bit with narrowed eyes. He blinked at her. It was a little scary.

Then she closed her eyes, sighed, snuggled into him, and went to sleep.

***

Inner Reaches
Azure Flame Faction

"Remarkable," said Burnwater, shaking his head. Two of the most sought-after candidates in the whole Integration somehow ended up together.

It was rather awkward from the Azure Flame Faction's perspective.

Most of the Nine Great Factions were quite cordial with each other.

There was lots of crossover and exchange between their disciples. For instance—the Azure Flame Faction and Deep Earth Hall had always been quite friendly; disciples of the Path of Volcanoes would come to Azure Flame for a season to study shared Fire-Earth Concepts. And the same was true for the Azure Flame's Core Magma Paths the other way around.

Only—the paths of Fire and Wood had almost no crossover. They also tended not to get along in general—it was a matter of personality. Azure Flame folk tended to be passionate. Intense. World Tree Temple, gentle yet firm.

In recent years it had grown more than that, though. Precisely because of the Title Reina held now.

"Are the Arandors still throwing a tantrum?" mused Sage Noughtfire.

Burnwater nodded. That Great House had been quick to point fingers. As soon as their last Mistress vanished, they claimed it was the Azure Flame Faction's doing.

No one could quite be sure what happened for sure, though. All they knew was that the Mistress had gotten trapped on a B-Ranked Planet and perished there. Lan Arandor, the new High Priest, claimed she'd been chased there by an Azure Flame Faction Grand Elder. The two Factions had been on icy terms since.

"I know how those Arandors operate," said Noughtfire. "Eldrin's as cold-blooded as they come. You'd think he was an Eternal Winter Ancestor."

The old man snorted. "It's as likely he had a hand in it as anyone else."

Sage Burnwater winced. It was quite an accusation to make. Yet it wasn't like things between their Factions could get much worse.

***

Avery got her Fourth Evolution too—and with it came an umbrella for an upgraded Soul Weapon. This was quite baffling to all of them, including Avery, until she figured out what it did. It let her bounce Skills off easier. It could also unfold far bigger than you'd think, making a screen over them that could cloak them even in the Astral Plane. It also had the ability to keep off rain.

The next morning, Zane and his friends all set off for what Reina believed was the final section. They were nearing the end of the floor.

Soon they came upon it.

A single tower leaning high into the sky. Black storm clouds swirled around it, converging at the peak; lightning shattered down its length. It looked vaguely gothic, made of some mottled-black steel. You could see the vague impressions of faces swirling against it, souls pressing up against the surface before fading back into the gloom…

You have entered:
Citadel of the Damned

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242. New Powers (II)

The weird thing was, the whole way here they saw no Monsters. Not one—Avery didn't even find any on the horizon. It was as though they'd all deserted.

Maybe they'd already cleared out most of the Monster armies said Evan hopefully. Or maybe they knew they couldn't take on Zane anyways—so they just left. Though that seemed unlikely to Reina.

Whatever the case, it was a pretty easy path through to the final section.

You have entered:
Citadel of the Damned

Ahead, circling the Citadel, loomed an imposing set of wrought-iron gates. Made of that same soul-touched steel; tortured souls pressed up against the material, shrieking soundlessly before fading back. There were runes etched throughout—crudely and angrily, as though with a jagged stone. They seethed the color of blood.

Past those gates there was a clear energy difference. Like they led to a new zone—a new Lair… the essence density, the density of the Corruption Law inside, crackling on the air, was otherworldly.

There was something weird going on with that gate, Zane felt. It gave the impression like it was the trunk of a tree—like its roots went deep into the realm. Its aura was that of this world itself. It was the same way with the Citadel.

These things were very old. Set pieces. As clear a Boss Lair as they had seen in a while. Marked out stark on the mini-map.

Reina could already tell it had been tampered with. Just by the auras inside. She was sure there were creatures there too strong for this realm.

Yet they all felt ready.

They were all evolved. With Reina's new powers, she could buff him like never before. And Zane's new powers made it hard for this realm to hold him at times. It would take a lot more than a demon army to threaten them now.

She nodded to Zane. They were all ready.

He started thinking happy violent thoughts. Crushing bones, blood exploding out of shattered bodies. That kind of thing. It gave him a simple warmth in his heart. It got his blood pumping, got him amped up.

He took a deep breath.

They marched on through.

***

As they stepped up the gate swung slowly open, creaking. A long wail of rusted steel.

They went on through.

You have entered: Boss Lair: Desolation Field

And sure enough—

Lair lock!

Clearance Condition: survive every Monster Wave that emerges from the Citadel.

The Citadel rose before them, a bleak crumbling tower. It had a gaping black maw of an entrance.

Between them lay a vast open expanse, a shattered landscape of rocks and chunks of smoldering obsidian.

The ground here was charred black. The air thick with static, with Lightning Laws. They coalesced around strange black pillars studded throughout the field, pillars striking halfway up the sky.

Pools of fetid oily liquid were scattered here and there too, like windows to another realm; whispering, eyeless faces bubbled up against the surface, pressing pale ghostly hands against the thick waters before fading back…

Thunder boomed overhead.

The centerpiece of it all stood at the yard's center. An altar etched with the same runes as the gates. Pulsing with great waves of Corruption energy. The storm overhead seemed centered there, swirling around it, feeding off it, almost…

Then there was the Citadel itself. On the mini-map it was one giant block of red. At first, it looked like a coloring error. Then Zane blinked and realized it was swirling. Sloshing around with a frantic manic energy. Growls and hisses and shrieks issued out of its bleak entrance, so many at once they merged into some awful ear-piercing white noise…

"Oh, boy," mumbled Avery.

The Citadel was stuffed to the brim with Monsters.

"They must have been saving them up," said Reina. "So they could rush us all at once." Her expression darkened. "They wanted to make us fight the whole realm…"

There was a silence as they all considered it.

"We can do it!" chirped Evan.

Zane figured it was a good time to take out that last gift Zane got—the one from the Azure Flame Faction. The Earth S-Ranked Talent

Elixir.

If that last big battle had been a great chance to Level…

***

They'd hardly finished drinking when the Citadel began to rumble. Began to shiver down to its foundations, leaking gouts of smoke, as though about to collapse… there was a great shift happening in that tower.

Auras descending en masse.

The Monsters were coming.

The Citadel's entrance was like the entrance to a cave of endless depth, a stark black cutout in the world. They started seeing vague shapes materializing from the gloom.

Wave One
Begin

Zane began to burn. And it wasn't long before he started noticing the difference in his body. The first thing was his new heart. Every thump came fierce—like he had swapped out the engine of his body, the part of him that powered everything. His whole body thrummed with new vigor. His blood flowed faster, hotter—essence rushed through his muscles, lighting up every last fiber.

He felt alive. More alive than he ever had. Powerful just standing there, trembling. A dense pure energy began building in every inch of him—down his arms, his legs…

He clenched his fists. His aura flared. He stared down his enemy.

The demons emerged from the dark. In one vast horde.

The ones they'd fought had been like dinosaurs decomposed, black rotting bodies, white bone sticking through tattered skin, making exoskeleton armors, limbs all out of proportion. Mistakes of nature.

The demons coming at them now made even less sense. Heads to either side of their bodies, two, three arms welded on lopsided, prowling in drunken gaits, teeth sticking out of every conceivable place. Creatures ripped straight from children's nightmares.

Great Corruption Demon (Monster)
Essence Level 299

Their sick warped auras felt almost double as strong as the demons that had come before. They'd fused. Grown even more monstrous. Reina let out a little gasp.

And they just kept coming. Slobbering tar, growling…

Zane's Chains flickered to his hands.

Hammers for now. The Notifications had mentioned that these things would come in waves. If he used his axes, his Cyclone, it would be all or nothing—he would burn out too fast. He had to be sure he

finished them all by the end.

Waves, one by one, would be a matter of endurance.

He sensed much smashing in his future.

This first wave seemed to be just getting started. Enough Monsters had spewed out to fill half the enormous yard, seventy or eighty, and they just kept coming. Greater Auras too. Nascent Auras…

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Heavy footsteps trembling the ground—and three Monster Knights ducked out of the Citadel. One by one. Groaning, knuckles dragging against the ground, making furrows deep as riverbeds…

Netherworld Giant (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 319

Then—stalking out behind them—

Blight Wolf (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 318

Two big ones, the size of pickup trucks.

Five Monster Knights in just the first wave.

They really were throwing everything at him.

The last of them were coming out now. And the horde was complete. Running one end of the Lair to another. Too many to count, all gnashing curving teeth, acid drool, cracked red eyes, nightmares in flesh...

Zane's eyes narrowed.

They could throw however many as they liked at him.

He felt his heart pounding stronger than ever. Proud, blazing with life.

He would see who fell first.

***

Reina had his back. Evan and Avery at the sides, ready to help as the shambling army advanced on them.

Zane lifted his hammers. And Stormfire blazed to life. Two purple suns suspended in the air, burning out the dark.

The Blight Wolves snarled. The Netherworld Giants groaned deep. The Monsters let out all manner of grotesque war cries.

Zane let out a bellow to match.

He smashed down a step. And barreled straight into the thick of it, hammers flashing.

Then it was not so much a battle, but a slaughter.

He felt at that moment like a charging Titan Rhinoceros, felt viscerally the immensity of the power in his body as he let loose his first hammer-blow.

It sank straight through the head of a Giant, crashed out the other side—and the massive beast's jaw shattered, skull ruptured, black blood exploding out the ears. Then the huge head was falling, a meteor of Stormfire careening to the ground…

Zane's second hammer struck dead into the heart of the army. And lit up the battlefield.

Rotted limbs showered like debris. Burning up brilliant purple, shattering first on the impact, smoking up mid-air as the fires did their work…

Zane just kept smashing. Roaring. He struck left—and crushed a swathe of souls, a dozen Level 290s beasts—smashed right and crushed a Monster Knight flat, driven twenty feet into the ashes, splattered in a smoldering crater.

He was a machine of fire and blood. Everywhere he turned he wrecked. The difference and what he was made of was so clear to him now. These creatures, these lesser bodies—their teeth scrabbled against his skin, fists and claws pinged off his back, his chest, even his head, finding no purchase on his muscles, finding no weakness in his bones, breaking themselves uselessly against him. Even as he turned, and lay waste to them. Every little movement. Every stomp, every punch, was done with a ferocious new power.

His heartbeat thumped strong in his ears.

These creatures could not contain him.

He mowed down the army's whole left side in a chain of Stormfire blasts. The Blight Wolves leapt for him more desperate than fierce, blazing Corruption—his hands shot, caught them by the scruffs of their massive necks, stopped their momentum dead, until they were thrashing in his iron grip, giant red eyes bulging helplessly. And by now his skin was burning so hard it scorched theirs, melting the skin to slag; they howled even as they choked.

He slammed the beasts into the ground. So hard he split fissures down the length of the yard. Felt with great satisfaction the way their bodies gave way—the bone shattering, the muscle tearing under his fists…

When he let go of them you couldn't tell what they'd been. The way squashed bugs look—just bloody splotches, smashed flat beyond recognition.

He turned back caked in blood. None of it his own. Black blood all down his front side, staining his back too. Teeth bared.

And lay waste to the rest of them.

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243. Final Wave (I)

First Wave Cleared!

Zane wasn't breathing very heavy at all. He did a quick scan of his body. Looked good. A little pumped, maybe. But not much damage. A little bruised. A few scrapes, but that was bound to happen. So many demons had gotten licks at him—shattered their fangs against his skin, raking claws over his chest, his back… A few broke through. He hardly even felt them.

He was bleeding in a few places. There were blackened moles where the Corruption wormed in. But it had trouble getting much out of him.

His Vitality overwhelmed the bulk of it. Burned the poison right off.

All in all, they had gotten a little more than 10% Health off of him.

He looked over the corpses burning over the vast field—a sea of purple flame. Smoking up. Changing color. Going to essence. Great streams of it bent toward him, swamping him all at once…

Level up!

So much of it, it blinded him. It wouldn't stop pouring in. He supposed that was what happened when you fused so many Monsters together.

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 268 -> 273

Zane nodded. Pleased at the destruction he had wrought.

"Heck yeah!" cried Avery. Evan cheered too.

His friends didn't have to do very much there. Reina was relieved. It was as she thought—the Monsters of this realm couldn't handle him. She told him to keep doing what he was doing. He nodded.

His essence was maybe only a quarter depleted, too. So was his Bloodline. He had plenty to give.

Reina didn't understand what the Monsters were doing either. They should have known they couldn't match him. This was almost feeding him Levels. Either these things had just not clocked Zane's power, or…

A thought seemed to occur to her. She frowned.

Maybe that was the idea, she murmured. She bit her lip, looked to the mini-map. To the Citadel.

The density of the redness inside had hardly gone down.

"Just how many Monsters are in that thing?" she said, blinking. "… Just how many waves are left?"

Second Wave
Begin

The Citadel's shadowy entrance was bubbling again. New Demons already emerging from the gloom…

Zane had barely gotten a minute's rest.

His essence still hadn't recovered. Neither had his Bloodline.

That was the crux of it, breathed Reina. And suddenly she started worrying again.

New Wolves prowled out of the dark. A good head bigger than the last.

Great Blight Wolf (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 328

Three of them this time, one after another. And they were a good ten Levels stronger than the last few—growling through bared scythe-like teeth, Corruption essence seething inside them. And a host of Level 299 Wolf-beasts prowling after them, some with two heads or three. All flush with essence.

"They're trying to tire you," Reina told him. "They know they can't beat you head-on—so they'll throw as much as they can at you until you run out!"

Zane frowned.

Watched as three more Netherworld Giants emerged too. One after another, amid a burgeoning horde. They just kept coming, swamping the battlefield—the Stormfire had hardly stopped burning over the corpses of their allies…

There were new Nascent Monsters too.

Lich Pyromancer (Monster Knight)
Essence Level 320

Ten feet tall, draped in tattered red robes, with sallow sunken faces, papered in waxy skin. Deep-red flames where their eyes should be. Each carried a staff, a Soul Weapon, that looked like a giant torch—its end dripped gobs of lava, hissing and steaming and pooling, making cooling trails behind them…

They had brought Fire Laws to compete with Zane's own. Zane recognized those from the Azure Flame Faction. That was Core Magma.

In all, there were Nine Monster Knights this time. And a horde a good deal bigger than the last, so big they struggled to fit in the vast desolate yard. Each of their hateful red eyes trained on Zane. Slobbering, growling, spluttering, hissing…

They were going to throw a whole realm's worth of Monsters at him.

They thought this would be enough to bring him down.

… Hm.

He thought about it, brow creased.

He knew, at the bottom of things, none of them could compete with him. None of them had his Concept. None had his essence. His body. His heart.

But now he knew what they were trying to do—he would have to be more considerate about how he went about this. If these waves just kept ratcheting up…

He narrowed his eyes.

"Stay with me," he told Reina.

Reina nodded fiercely. "Always."

He told Evan to start picking off the strongest Monster Knights—at least badly wounding them. He asked Avery to deflect some of their worst attacks.

"Gotcha!" said Avery.

So they wanted to bleed him dry.

He would see about that.

He simply had to make sure he was a lot more than they could handle.

***

Zane had more than just his essence and his Bloodline. He had his body. He had his spirit.

They would need to bleed out all four. Only then could they take him down.

He knew he would have to use all of his powers to destroy them. It was just a matter of choosing what to use. And when.

This time he met the Monster horde head on. This time he brought out his Chains. Wrapped his fists. Lit them on Stormfire. Simple. Clean.

He burned his blood.

Enough to fire things up. To light his Chains with a ferocious intensity. Most of the fuel for his Asura state came from Zane's soul. The feeling lighting up his heart.

As he faced down that wall of darkness, breathing heavy, his fighting spirit raged fierce as ever.

This was what he was made for.

He waded into the dark masses. Bellowing. Fists blazing.

Zane took a battering.

In the next few minutes, fangs tipped with some of the most extreme poisons a Nascent Soul creature could generate, sharp as Sky-grade weapons, drilled into his muscles. And injected Corruption deep into him. Fists big as wrecking balls smashed into his head, whacked his chin, his chest, struck him all over with enough force to blow the peaks off mountains. An army of demons, pouring all their most violent efforts into bringing him down…

Zane took it all head-on.

And gave it right back.

Fists flashing, bringing intensities found only in the hearts of stars down to the midst of battle. Vaporizing beasts whole, puncturing the heart of the army, crushing line after line in a furious charge. When they hit him with the force to topple a mountain, he struck back with the force to shatter a continent. All that raw fleshly power backed with the pure explosive power of raw Stormfire…

He smashed right through the chest of a Great Blight Wolf. Fists sinking deep, exploding the heart in one forceful grab—blood blasted out its slack jaws. Then Stormfire shot out its mouth, its nostrils, as its body exploded from the inside.

He took fangs to the back of his neck. Took wrecking-ball knuckles to the side of his head, stumbled, growled, whirled around, leaped, struck right back, sent a giant the size of a skyscraper barreling to the ground….

Then the Pyromancers were upon him. Trying to bury him. Dredging up the densest, heaviest magma they could muster, dropping lakes of it straight over his head—Zane smashed one away in a fury. Then another. A third crashed against his back, hundreds of tons of molten metal catching him unawares, CLANG!-ing against the back of his head, making him stumble—he gave a surprised grunt.

Then a third massive glob sank him under the surface.

For a moment there was only a lake of molten metal, churning, trying to contain him… Reina let out a cry.

Then the whole thing began to tremble. The lava started splotching purple. Brightening and brightening, heating up until it all neared white—like they were staring straight into center of some purple supernova, brighter than the sun—

It erupted. Lava roasting up, burning to Stormfire, splattering everywhere. And there was Zane, standing in the midst of a new crater. Heaving deep breaths. A little scorched.

But mostly angry.

He launched straight for a Lich. A blur of sheer force. Wrapped one hand around its skull. Closed the other around its neck. And in one jagged motion he ripped its head straight off. The body erupted

instantly; he whirled, stomped down, slammed a fist into the other Lich so fast you could see for a flicker of a moment its gaping expression. Then the Stormfire consumed it so fast it lost all shape, a vague outline frozen amid the intensity… when the light faded not even its ashes were left.

Zane did not slow. Did not stop. That was the thing with him. If anything, his rampage only built in its ferocity—it seemed like every slash, every stab, every smash he took only gave him new strength.

If you wanted to stop him, you would have to kill him.

And none of the Monsters there proved up to the task.

Zane stumbled out of it at last. Singed all over. One eye swollen with poison, with Corruption. Patches of it burning down his body.

He left only death behind him.

Second Wave Cleared!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 273 -> 278

Even with Reina doing her best to heal him there, he'd dipped dangerously near 50%... but that was the plan.

He leaned on his body to get the job done. Sparing a good deal of essence and Bloodline. He had to give of his flesh to do it. It was a trade-off he was willing to make.

And this time he did see a noticeable decrease in how many red dots there were on the mini-map. He was down to about half of his essence, half his Bloodline… Reina did a little calculating, brow furrowed. At this rate, she figured there might be two more waves—maybe three? And she had a sinking feeling they would each come heavier than the last…

Zane would need to outlast them all.

He took in the scope of the task. Still breathing heavy.

"You ready, big fella?" said Avery. Looking a little nervous.

"I will not fail," Zane promised her.

He turned back to face the Citadel. Jaw set.

He meant it.

***

Third Wave
Begin

Five Great Blight Wolves. Three Lich Pyromancers. Two Giant Spiders. Three Void-Bringers—swirling human-shaped voids, indistinct

figures whose very presence warped reality, tore rifts in space… just another kind of Monster Knight.

Reina was right. They really just kept getting harder and harder.

Reina healed him where she could. Evan got some good snipes in on the Voidbringers, and Avery deflected some magma-gobs. But in the end… it came down, again, to how much Zane could take.

These Voidbringers cut weirdly. Those crackling void-blades they made could get past much of the defenses of his skin, stabbed straight into his muscles, tore them up… though he found when he put his hands on them, he could crush them just like all the rest.

Zane took everything they had.

He just kept fighting.

***

Inner Reaches
Azure Flame Faction

"How is he doing that?" said Burnwater. "Sustaining that kind of intensity—for that long?!"

"I suspect," said Noughtfire slowly. "It's to do with his Signature Title."

They watched as Zane—bleeding from dozens of wounds, half-blackened with Corruption, stumbling and staggering—wrestled down a Great Blight Wolf, and crushed it with his bare hands.

"It pairs well with his personality. It allows him to use his will to fuel his Asura State. As long as that never runs out, he can keep fighting. Then there's his Levels—each wave he gets a little physically stronger. Even as his essence and Blood and Law run thin…"

The old Sage paused.

The wave ended. There was Zane—on one knee. Smoking. Coughing blood, breathing deep, heaving in breath after breath. Hands broken. Muscles shredded down his chest, back, arms… Swaying a little. Reina stayed at his side, frantically working on him—then the Levels came in, healing his body up…

He didn't get back up. Not immediately.

"Still. All that damage, all that fighting, takes a toll. He's tried to conserve his strength. But it's clear he's running low."

"He *is* one man, in the end," said Burnwater, shaking his head. "Fighting a realm."

Noughtfire made a noise of agreement. He gave a little smile. He almost looked proud. "Gilgorath must be beside itself. He should have gone down two waves ago. And yet…"

Zane stood. Still swaying a little. But he was up.

"Is that the end of it?" said Burnwater, relieved. "The man's about to collapse!"

Noughtfire stayed silent.

His little smile faded. He narrowed his eyes.

He, like Zane, was looking to the Citadel's entrance…

"It's not over."

An aura exploded out of it. One single aura.

It was like nothing that had come so far. It was the only one that matched the ferocity of Zane's Stormfire… and it was vast enough to drown out any of the waves that came before.

Burnwater paled.

"That's Mid-Fusion," he croaked. "Heavens—Gilgorath brought in a *Grand Knight!*"

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246. Final Wave (IV)

Zane had a single wish.

He wished for destruction. Wished it with all his heart.

His powers responded.

His hammers rose overhead. Caught fire. Brightening so fast it was like seeing a time lapse—the darkness washing away, night melting to day as two suns rose high in the sky...

The heat beat down in waves. An otherworldly heat. Crackling and searing—beating down in the astral plane as much as the physical, scorching the soul.

Thalrex stared.

The Storm Giant couldn't seem to believe what it was seeing. Couldn't believe the broken human before it had anything left inside.

It hissed, raised a fat arm, trying to shield its eyes from the light, the heat, the intensity of it—Thalrex had to turn away.

Zane was barely even conscious anymore.

He just knew he had an enemy. And he knew he had to destroy it. A single want. And the fire in his heart spurred him on. Drove him to finish it.

He let out one last hoarse roar. And unleashed his worst.

The stars fell out of the sky.

Thalrex threw up desperate shields, called in those cloud layers to aid it. But the Stormfire crushed right through. Didn't stop—didn't even slow. Punched through with brutal ease. Lighting it up as it passed.

Another swirling whirlpool of a shield shot up, trying to stop it—it was no use. There was simply too much momentum, too much heat, too much raw power.

Nothing could have halted Zane then.

Thalrex's mouth opened wide. Maybe it was about to try one last-ditch blast. Maybe it was screaming. No one would ever know.

Zane's hammers made landfall for the last time. And whited out the world.

It struck with such ferocity Zane almost went out himself. He staggered back, bracing against the heat of it. He still had just a sliver of consciousness left in him—enough to shield his friends with his soul.

It was a good thing, too.

When the light faded the rest of the realm was hardly recognizable.

It was what destruction looked like in its purest form. Leveled utterly flat. Flat far as the eye could see—no more rivers of magma, no more obsidian boulders studding the landscape. Even the Corruption scars had been wiped from the air. Slag on slag on slag...

All that remained were the Gates. Half knocked-over. Broken, smoking, teetering listlessly. Smoldering Stormfire. And the Citadel. Blackened down its whole front face, leaning over so far it seemed on the verge of collapse. Chunks crumbled off the weary stone...

Zane saw no sign of Thalrex. Just the point of impact. The blackest spot in the mess. Above it a great void was slowly knitting back up, swallowing in streams of ash as it did…

The job was done. At last.

Essence rushed into him.

Level up!
Level up!
Leve—

Zane brushed it aside blearily. One more thing, before he could let himself go. He turned to check up on Reina and Evan and Avery. Made sure they were okay.

They were.

Relief was the last thing he remembered.

He face-planted.

***

Level up!
Essence Level 290 -> 298

He woke to the notification. Then to a pale-looking but relieved Reina.

“We made it,” she said softly, brushing a strand of hair out of his face. “You got it done.”

Avery was a little exhausted, but in good spirits.

Evan was still shaking a little though. Scrunched up.

Zane’s brow creased. “Are you okay?” he rumbled.

“Mhm! Reina healed me up really well,” said Evan. He put on a little wobbly smile. But Zane could still sense a lingering fear in Evan—it spiked and ebbed. Zane frowned, thinking back.

He wondered how close Evan came to death just then.

Zane remembered what it felt like to get struck by that lightning. It was horrible—even for him. He had lost a quarter of his life in one go. And Zane, more than anyone, was conditioned to take blows like that. He remembered Evan’s terrified scream…

Evan was very brave. And Zane felt he had a stronger will than most. But still. Zane could shrug it off. But Evan wasn’t used to taking

that kind of punishment.

Evan was still trying to keep positive, even as he quivered.

“I’m going to be okay!” he said.

Zane patted him on the head. “You did really good.”

Zane felt something in his chest. A tightness. Evan had been making such good progress getting over his nervousness. But that shock had just put some of the fear back in him. It bothered Zane.

He never wanted to put Evan in that position again. Any of them. They were not meant to get hurt like he was. He turned to Reina. She looked and felt a little guilty about the whole thing.

Zane thought she was right. If he went all out from the very beginning he might not have even lasted long enough to get off Wish Upon A Star. He would have just keeled over. She had suggested the way to win. That was her job. Zane told her she did the only thing she could. In the end…

He could only blame himself. Taking those hits was his job. He had failed his friends.

He clenched a fist, frowning.

He had to get stronger.

Reina put a hand on his arm. She said no one was to blame. It was a battle rigged against them—there were things they couldn't control. It happened.

“Mhm!” said Evan.

“You can't be expected to take on the whole world by yourself,” she said.

“Yes,” said Zane stubbornly.

She just gave him a look, then a kiss, and sighed. “Oh, Zane…”

They moved on.

“Hey, on the bright side—we’re alive!” said Avery. “Huzzah! Anyone want a S’more?”

Mostly they were tired. But it was true—they’d survived, and it was a big weight off all their shoulders. And it seemed they'd cleared the realm too.

Right in the middle of the Citadel, on the very first floor, glowed a yellow dot. The staircase.

Leading down to the next floor.

They wouldn't go just yet, they decided. They would take a breather here. They all needed it.

***

“Quick!” bellowed the Barbarian Sage. “We’ve got to swap out the gift—before it's too late! Can we even do that?!”

“Err—” said an assistant.

The Barbarian Sage grabbed him by the shoulders, started shaking him about.

“Speak, damn you! My boy’s about to hit Nascent Soul! Even I hadn’t thought he’d get there this fast—we’ve got to get it to him by then!”

“I—I suppose we can give it a try, if we could get the Grand Artificer on it—”

“Go. Now! And tell him the Barbarian Sage sent you!”

The assistant scampered off.

The Head Scout looked frazzled. “Is Zane really about to manage it? Heavens…”

“Has there ever been such a thing?” chuckled the Barbarian Sage. “Nascent Soul, mid-Integration?”

“I’ve heard the Buddha did it. And the Stone Monkey Sage. But that’s the stuff of legend...”

The Scout said all this in a stunned faraway voice. “No one’s really sure it even happened. Certainly not this Chaos Cycle.”

“His’ll be a hell of a Soul too,” harrumphed the Barbarian Sage. He rubbed his hands eagerly. “Did you see how many Monsters he had to slay to get him there? The foundation of it, that Core—it’s well past ready. And he’s prepped his body well too. If my gift arrives in time there’s no telling what grade he’ll condense!”

He shook his fist at the ceiling. “Damn that Chained bastard—but I’ll bet it didn’t expect this, did it?” He barked a laugh.

“Yes, Grand Elder,” said the Head Scout helplessly.

“Tell you what. If he manages a high-grade soul too—Sky, perhaps even Heaven—I expect not much’ll stand up to him in those lower floors,” said the Sage. “Unless that Chained bastard finds some truly ridiculous loophole… he’s going all the way!”

***

Evergreen Grove
World Tree Faction

Lan Arandor watched the whole thing. Pale as a corpse.

He was silent after he finished. Then—

“Taele?” he said softly. The only other elf in the room. His chief Inquisitor.

“Yes.”

“Zane Walker must die.”

“…Yes.”

“So, too, must the Mistress Maker. If the two of them survive…” he shuddered. “I did not wish to take this risk. But in the end… I fear it could be the only way.”

Taele’s head swiveled to look at his master, pupil-less eyes blinking. He moved like an owl; his body stayed put. There was something off-putting about the elf, something not-quite-there. “Do you mean…” he

said slowly.

Lan nodded. All stiff. But his jaw was set.

The Nine Great Factions couldn't influence anything directly. They could only send in objects from the outside as gifts—that was all. The only way to exert the sort of influence they needed was to collude with someone on the inside.

"Send a signal," said Lan. "And be discreet about it. Tell that—that thing… Lan Arandor has a proposal."

Taele's licked his lips. "I shall."

***

It had become a bit of a tradition to stop before they reached the next floor and take in their winnings.

Not long after Zane woke, a yellow pool popped up on the mini-map. A treasure area spawned right in front of them. When they stepped within—

System has detected internal tampering
Participants have been subjected to unfair challenges
Restoring balance…
Calibrating compensation…

Evan and Avery both got Vials with 10 droplets of Bloodline, amounting to Earth S-rank treasures. That would help boost their skills a great deal. At least two rarity levels.

Evan's Signature was already enough to wound a Nascent Monster Grand Knight once he charged it up. Zane suspected after the next upgrade, even he would have to respect Evan's charged-up shots.

Avery could already deflect lots of Thalrex's strikes even though she was a whole grade of power below. She'd get a strong boost too.

Reina, meanwhile, got a Law treasure perfectly tailored toward her next Concept, Regrowth. A Mid-Tier Concept. If she managed it, it'd be a massive leap in her already strong buffing Skills. She could boost their regenerations sky-high.

They were all becoming pretty remarkable in their own right.

As for Zane—he got just one vat of essence. It dropped out of the sky and sank a good foot into the ashy ground. A big old drum of it, like something you would use for crude oil.

Drum of Essence [Earth (S)]

You could feel just how much densely packed essence lay inside—aura wafted off it like heat waves in the Astral Plane…

The System knew exactly what he needed. At Level 298 he had just two more Levels to go.

He grabbed the Spirit Steel cover, ripped it straight off. And started drinking straight from the drum.

And a river of pure dense essence poured in.

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247. Nascent Soul (I)

Each time Zane Leveled now, it was a challenge. Killing Monsters did not feel like enough anymore. Like trying to fill up a lake with buckets of water. Toward the end of it, demolishing an army barely gave him a few.

But the vat he'd just gotten was filled to the brim with the densest essence he'd ever felt.

He dove in eagerly.

It still took half an hour of chugging or so before—

Level up!
Essence Level 298 -> 299

He felt like his Core was starting to run up against some impossible wall. A natural barrier. The more essence he took in the more started leaking out of him.

He was getting close.

He grabbed the thing and started dumping it straight into his mouth. He put it down, wiped his face with the back of an arm, took a couple of deep breaths, and went straight back.

Glug-glug-glug—

He needed more.

Much more.

***

Not long after, though—

He looked up. The day was changing over, the skies darkening to a witching purple.

And stars started streaking again.

Their gifts were coming.

Reina got an essence treasure—just a basic Essence Vial, but it was a high enough grade she couldn't complain. It would boost her to the mid-Level 280s. Avery and Evan both got comprehension boosters—Evan, a 'Great Fortune Cookie'. He gasped as it dropped in his hands. As he started munching he cheered up again. He had the attention span of a small fish, which turned out to be a good thing—he forgot all about being scared, at least for now. Evan would be okay.

Avery got another serving of spring water. They really liked giving her spring water.

Zane's treasure crash-landed right in front of him, sinking a good

two feet into the ashes. The light faded.

Raiyin's Elixir of Purification [Earth (S+)]

The signature Elixir of the great Alchemist Raiyin, concocted of a mixture of Godbeast Bone Marrows. Purifies the body of all impurities for a brief period, preparing the vessel to receive the Nascent Soul.

It came from that one fellow from the Steelheart Conclave according to a hastily scrawled note.

Zane looked up. "Thanks."

He still wasn't sure what Nascent Soul really meant. Then again, he hadn't known what Core had been either when he went into it. And that had worked out fine.

He scratched his head, looked around. It wasn't like there was anyone here to tell him. Reina's best guess from what they'd seen was that it involved somehow bringing the soul into the body. Fusing the physical and the spiritual. He took her word for it.

He told them he was going to go for it. He wasn't sure how long it would take. But historically speaking, Zane going for things tended to mean explosions. Often in his own face. So they quickly shuffled off, gave him a safe distance. Reina went off to ponder a Mid-Tier Concept, Evan and Avery their Levels.

Leaving Zane there to try to hammer this thing out.

First he uncorked the Elixir. And drank.

It felt like a sauna within. His insides felt hot all of a sudden, like he was running a high fever—he felt his blood start burning, lighting up his veins. Then his tendons. Then his muscles, too—a kind of pleasant pain. Like the sort you get after hard exertion.

He let out a breath. A steam-cloud wafted over. His skin went red, like he'd been sunburned all over.

He started to sweat—not water, but a cloying black ooze…

When it stopped he was caked in the gunk.

He had to set himself on Stormfire to get it all off him.

He felt like he had been scrubbed clean. Every inch of him—from his skin to his bones to his organs. There was a certain lightness to him. Like he had just woken from a long restful sleep.

So far, so good.

At last, he stared down the barrel of essence. At that last swill of it sloshing away inside. Took a breath. Tipped it over. And drank.

The essence gushed down his throat. Hit his Core. And filled it to the brim.

His Core shuddered. And its spin began to slow, sagging under its own weight, nearly overflowing. More and more…

Until it ground to a final halt.

Zane blinked.

…Was that supposed to happen?

"Hmm," said Zane.

Then—

"HNGGGG," groaned Zane.

He felt very strange sensation—a lurch, an unsteady, wobbling feeling, a sense of vertigo deep in his soul. He didn't really know what to make of it—he was sure he had never felt this before. He would've remembered.

Then he doubled over.

It was still going. Growing more intense, a little earthquake going off inside him, rumbling away… he felt the tremors not in his body but his soul. His body felt perfectly fine.

The one place it showed up was his Core. The very center of it. There the sensations were strongest.

His Core began to shiver.

…He really hoped that was supposed to happen.

He felt a sudden connection.

Right at that point. It had always been there, Zane realized. Just distant, faint. So faint he hardly felt it. But it was clear to him now—that was where his soul attached to his body. His center in physical and astral space. The core of Zane.

It was where his Core formed—and that connection, that link to his soul, was what set it in motion. Gave it its power. Granted his essence its vitality. Without it, his Core would be little more than that vat of essence he had just drunk.

His soul gave it life. Made it his own.

He felt it happening even now—more strongly than ever before…

It had always animated his essence. The way the sun heats you from a great distance. You never really notice until you look up.

Now it was getting closer.

That heat of it was intensifying. Growing quite noticeable; Zane felt the connection more and more intensely—

His essence began to burn.

And there—right at his center—was a breakthrough.

His soul broke through. And claimed his Core.

Just a little at first. Like a splash of new color on a blank canvas. But it was there.

He felt that connection solidifying.

Its influence was quickly growing. And it started to change the very character of his Core.

Not its aspects, or its Laws… it just started to feel like him.

He could sense it in his new aura. There was a sense of great weight, of strength, an unyielding stubbornness, and above all, a sense

of vastness. If you stood in its presence, it'd feel like staring up from the foot of a mountain at a peak lost in distant clouds.

It began to give his essence, his very being, the character of Zane.

It began to claim his essence as his own. Claim his body for his own.

That sense only grew stronger.

His Soul began arriving in this world. Not merely as some distant connection—it was here, fully present, powering all that he was.

Body and Soul were merging as one.

That was Nascent Soul.

Soul Created!
Mortal-Grade Nascent Soul

But Zane was not done—not by far. He was just getting started. He could sense a new strength, a new heat, pouring down his limbs already. Imbued with a sense of himself. He knew if he powered any attack—with Stormfire or Steel—it would gain a boost. The strength, the vastness of his essence. A boost unique to him.

The more of his Core his Soul claimed, the greater that boost grew…

Already it had spread to a good tenth of his Core. But he could will more in if he really tried. His Soul right now was crossing some barrier, the gap between the physical and the spiritual…

Zane frowned. And focused hard.

He focused his desire on willing his soul through. On claiming his body wholly.

Instantly, he began to sweat.

It felt like he was fighting the nature of the world itself. He had to tear that barrier wide, force his way through—and it was tough going. There was a lot of him to fit through.

Once he did, though—that color only started spreading faster and faster.

Soul Grade Increased!
Mortal -> Earth

He kept forging ahead.

***

"He's at Earth already," said Burnwater faintly. The old Sage shook his head. "My Heavens—how much of his soul has he gotten through? 10%?!"

"Perhaps," said Noughtfire.

The two of them watched their scrying glasses in tense silence.

By now they were aware they were not the only ones in the Azure Flame faction watching this. Word had spread shockingly fast—this

was a once-in-a-Chaos-Cycle event, after all.

Burnwater had just gone to the Spring Banquet hosted by the Rising Phoenix Sage, and had heard of this super-talent 'Zane Walker' spoken of between Elders in the Inner Faction.

Even top-ranking Outer Faction Chosen hardly got such attention from the Inner Faction. A Pre-Integration Candidate was unheard of! If Burnwater didn't know who Zane Walker was, what that man was capable of, he would've thought everyone had lost their minds.

He was sure there were just as many skeptical Inner Faction Elders watching as curious ones. Wondering what all this fuss was about. If this so-called once-in-a-thousand-generations talent was all he was cracked up to be.

Nascent Soul was a critical foundational stage.

It was the stage that determined your potential. Once you fused soul and body, that fusion could never be changed. Manage something poor—such as low-Mortal-Grade—and you would be forever capped under Level 400. You would never glimpse Tier 5 Laws.

Something average—say, high-Mortal or low-Earth—meant you had hopes for Level 500. Sky and Profound talents often wound up in the Inner Faction.

And those Heaven-grade talents, the rarest of the rare… they had Patriarch potential. They could shake the Dragonspire Galaxy.

Just what would Zane Walker turn out to be? It was the question on everyone's minds.

"…You could be right," said Burnwater. "Regarding his potential soul grade." He could hardly believe he was saying it. "If the grade depends on three things—the size of the soul, the size of the Core, and how well he can merge them… at this rate, a 75% merge could be enough for Heaven-grade! And with what willpower he's shown…"

Burnwater hesitated. "Perhaps it's possible?"

It was still quite unlikely. A 75% merge would require an effort far beyond most men. And Heaven-grade was one of those nearly mythical grades. Burnwater almost didn't dare admit it was possible still with any confidence. But as Zane Walker set his jaw, and frowned, and kept on bulldozing ahead… Burnwater began to doubt.

Noughtfire stayed silent.

"What is it?" said Burnwater, since he could tell his master was turning something over in his mind.

"It's possible," said Noughtfire slowly. "When I predicted Heaven-grade… I may have even underestimated him."

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248. Nascent Soul (II)

Zane could feel a new vitality coursing through him. A new life borne on his new essence. An energy distinctly his own. Toughening him. Strengthening him wherever it went. His soul lending its traits to his body.

He had to fight to squeeze every bit of his soul through. He used Emperor's Soul to help with the effort. But his bulk still made things a slog.

He gritted his teeth. He was sweating up a storm—he threw himself headlong into the effort.

By now he'd gotten a good third of the way in.

Soul Grade Increased!
Earth -> Sky

The aura blasting out of him had grown bigger than any Nascent Soul creature he'd fought—bigger than even Thalrex.

A new sense was opening up to him. A new awareness of the Astral Plane, layered on the physical. Even as he closed his eyes he could feel deeply the world around him. He no longer needed light as a guide. He could sense essence for hundreds of feet around. A new world of bright sensations.

He felt a difference in his own essence too. Growing more corporeal, more real. If it had been like mist before now it was flowing like water, coursing fast and dense, flowing at a new level of power. A far more potent fuel.

Zane was still nowhere close to done.

This was still not enough for him.

What he had been through on this floor was still stuck in his mind.

When he told Reina he would have the strength to fight the world—he meant it.

His soul kept pouring in, suffusing his Core. Driven faster and faster by sheer force of will.

Now it was halfway through.

Soul Grade Increased!
Sky -> Profound

He could feel the world around him in high resolution now. Mapped bright in essence-senses…

His aura just kept growing.

"More," Zane growled.

He could feel the world starting to fight him even harder now. It wanted to cut him off. The more Zane got through, the fiercer he felt it—some omnipresent force dragging at his soul, trying to force him back to the Astral Plane. Trying to restrain him. To limit his power.

Zane fought back hard. Put his will there like a wedge, and held it. Refused to give in. Even as the pressure intensified, and strange lights started to flash in his eyes, darkening to gaping black spots…

His soul felt very strange. He started feeling woozy. Like he was being slowly crushed under the weight of some unseen mountain.

He must've been at least 60% of the way through now, though. Then 70%—

Soul Grade Increased!
Profound -> Heaven

Now the pressure was starting to peak.

Zane groaned. Brow creased. Face totally red, dripping sweat all over, his hands clenched to fists, drawing blood in his own palms. His heart hammered away, *BOOM-BOOM*-ing in his ears. His veins stood out stark purple against his skin.

The weight was starting to grow unbearable.

Zane bore it, bellowing with the effort.

80%.

Blood exploded in his mouth. Blood gushed down his nose. His teeth were gnashed so tight he could feel his gums flaring in white-hot pain.

He had been confused at first—but this far in things had become quite simple for Zane. It was him against the world. He was used to that.

The world would not defeat him.

90%. 91%. 92%…

Blood vessels popped in Zane's head. And he was beginning to get to the point where thinking grew fiendishly difficult; thoughts started flattening in his head. Crushed under the pressure.

But he was still able to hold onto one conviction. The conviction that made him himself.

He would not give in. He was not that kind of man.

93%…

94%…

He started dragging in ragged heaving breaths, his chest rising and falling, slick with a sheen of sweat.

No. Thought Zane.

95%... 96%…

It was no longer a mountain pressing down on him. It was

something higher than that. A continent. Then a world.

Zane wobbled for the first time.

97%

98%...

He felt the weight of space and time. Felt thousands, tens of thousands, millions—billions of souls, the vastness of the cosmos stacked together, all compressing—

All that weight fell on his shoulders.

He held it snarling.

His vision went all-white. Then all-black. He heard a distant rushing, vast and endless…

The pain. The strain. Was like nothing he had ever felt. Was something very few living creatures had ever felt—was something nothing had lived to survive.

99%—

Zane gave one last defiant roar, blood leaking from his cracked lips. He gave it his all.

He did not see 100%.

He blacked out.

***

He woke to a notification.

Soul Grade Increased!
Heaven -> Primordial

He blinked. Still feeling woozy.

Hey. Nice.

Then he groaned.

His head was still pounding. Something of a migraine. He shook his head, tried clearing things up…

That sixth sense—that essence-sense—was still there. He could feel the essence all around him like a light mist on the air. Feel the spots where it brightened against the background, where it dimmed… felt some big clumps of it coming toward him.

Reina and Avery and Evan were pattering back. Looking a little bewildered. He blinked, looked down at himself.

Lots of blood.

But he felt okay, physically speaking. A faint ache, a phantom pain in his jaw—that was all.

Then he felt the aura rolling off him. Like heat waves off the sun.

"…Zane?" gasped Reina, wide-eyed.

He scratched his head. "I got it done," he informed them. They still seemed a bit dumbfounded. Then he realized.

He had to reel his aura back in—he seemed to be literally glowing. His soul, his body, was exerting such a pressure they were having

trouble coming close to him.

He felt his soul viscerally then. He could wield it as easily as he could move any other limb—it was quite natural.

He pulled it back until it was just a little glow coming off his skin. That aura… it really did feel like him.

He inspected his hand, turned it over. Clenched it to a fist, opened it again, curious. Just to feel the power running through it.

He was not the same man as he was a day ago.

If those Monsters sent waves like those in the Citadel at him now…

It would not end well for them. He was certain of that. It was usually pretty hard to tell just how much stronger he had gotten after a big upgrade. But this one felt pretty clear. Even just standing there.

He wanted to see what they thought could bring him down now.

If the next floor was anything like this one… he clenched his fist.

He was looking forward to it.

A pause. Then—"Awesome!" cried Evan.

***

Inner Faction
The Azure Flame Faction

There was a similar silence in Sage Burnwater's little hut. And in palaces and pagodas all through the neighboring planets.

They would soon be in uproar.

"The strongest souls," Burnwater said shakily. "We have on record in the history of the Dragonspire Galaxy—they all gave out well before 90%. Even the Heavenly Emperor himself barely crossed that threshold… the forces Zane Walker was just subjected to… Nine Hells…"

Silence from Noughtfire.

Burnwater ran a hand through his frazzled hair. "Once he got near 100%... how much soul load would he have been bearing? It must be equivalent to the limits of several Patriarchs' put together!" he choked.

More silence. Then—

"It is as though," said Noughtfire slowly. "Zane Walker can make himself endure as long as he must. I must admit—this sort of willpower… I don't quite understand it."

It was the first time Burnwater had heard the old Sage so mystified.

They watched in silence as Zane and Evan plopped down, and started enjoying some unusually large chocolate chip cookies. Zane got some chocolate smeared on his face. He tried wiping it, frowning. It made things worse. Evan tried wiping it too and got it on his hands. They both blinked at each other, stumped.

Then—

“It makes no sense!” croaked Burnwater. “Nothing about this makes any sense. That simply isn’t how souls work—it flies in the face of all known theory! The man’s only human. Everyone’s got a breaking point!”

“…”

“…Right?”

Whatever the case. The repercussions of what they had just seen were soon felt across the Galaxy.

***

Observatory
Steelheart Conclave

Silence.

And then, a booming hearty laughter.

“*HELL Yeah*!”

That day the Barbarian Sage marched all the way to the Platinum Palace—the residence of the Steelheart Patriarch himself. And there, he got what was widely rumored to be a ludicrous funding package pushed through.

They would secure the prospect Zane Walker—and spare no expense in doing so. Even a Heaven-grade treasure could be on the table, if the rumors were to be believed.

At the same time, the higher-ups in the Azure Flame Faction were making similar preparations. Led by Sage Noughtfire himself.

As far as they were concerned, if Zane survived this ordeal—and that was looking ever more likely… they could be bidding on a future Ancestor or Patriarch of the Faction. A pillar of the Faction.

News of Zane’s breakthrough spread far and wide, across the Nine Great Factions. Often it was met with consternation or shock. But there were other reactions too. Especially among some of the other top talents of the age.

A redheaded woman was riding a Godbeast dragon through space when she heard the news. A giant bald monk in steel-thread garb, wielding a staff that weighed a planet. A boy sharpening a knife made of the void itself. And so on.

Whether out of jealousy, or suspicion, or plain curiosity… they wanted to see for themselves who this mystery upstart was. Whether he was all he was cracked up to be.

Whatever the case—it was the first time most in the Dragonspire Galaxy heard the name Zane Walker.

***

At the same time...

Evergreen Grove

World Tree Faction

The Ward set up around the Evergreen Grove was powered by the World Tree itself. Nigh unbreakable. And the privacy wards layered over them were inscrutable, carved by some of the finest artificers of the Steelheart Concave—they'd cost the World Tree Faction a fortune to procure. Strong enough to defend against even Fate Seers' scrying. They were only meant to be used in times of utmost emergency.

Lan Arandor put out a message. He was not to be disturbed. Not even his son was allowed to see him right now.

There was only one other person present in the room. His Chief Inquisitor Thaele.

The two of them stared into a crack in space. A kind of scrying glass suspended in the void.

A scrying glass tunneling through a secret, forbidden connection.

Lan Arandor was an ascended being, wielding Tier 6 Laws. And his Level was well over 600. But even he had to steel himself just to face the image of the creature before him. Its diluted aura, pouring through the gap…

"Greetings, Gilgorath," he said. Trying to keep his voice clear and firm. "I have a proposition for you."

The creature on the other side let out a laugh. A sound like steel grating on glass. Its many, many red eyes glinted in the endless dark….

"We have a common enemy," continued Lan, gritting his teeth. "And if things continue at this rate… we will not be able to stop him! The only way is if we work together. Combining your knowledge of your prison—and your influence over it—with our unique position as an Integration sponsor…"

A moment.

Speak.

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249. Steamroll

Zane got one more upgrade before they moved on.

It came after—

Level up!

Essence Level 299 -> 300

Class sub-evolution unlocked!

This sub-evolution grants an evolution to the user's Weapon Soul. At this stage, the Axe Form of the Prometheus Chains will be refurbished to suit the user.

Skill learned!

Savage Edge [Passive] [Mythic (E)]

The Axe's edge will be infused with the user's unique powers. The user's Stormfire will burn eternally on its edge at a +20% intensity. Combined with the sharpness of Prometheus Chains steel, the effect is that of a uniquely destructive slicing force.

This Skill's grade scales with Stormfire grade and Weapon Soul grade.

Zane didn't really need even more firepower, but this was a pleasant surprise. He was happy to take it. One could never be too powerful, he felt.

Speaking of—he collected all those Weapon Souls they'd harvested from all those waves of Monsters and Monster Knights he'd slain. It amounted, in total, to over 20 million souls' worth.

Level up!

Level up!

Weapon Soul 7 -> 9

At this Level the Prometheus Chains' durability and strength is equivalent to Mythic Sky-grade Spirit Steel.

Skill evolved!

Savage Edge [Mythic (E) -> Mythic+ (E)]

Now he was ready for the next floor.

…He had a feeling he was far more than ready.

***

Floor 44

Superdungeon

Floor 44 was a twilight world strung up with spiderwebs. Infested

with countless giant insects—and the Monstrous spiders that preyed on them. Once upon a time it had been a teeming forest. Now it was barren. The pale trees were hollow, leafless, lifeless. Little more than props for the spiders to spin their webs on as they waited impatiently for fresh prey…

A spider with a red stopwatch on its belly hissed. And exploded beneath a boulder of a fist.

"Can't be far now," grunted Nils, Thain's World Rank #3. A giant elephant-kin man with gray rugged skin and floppy ears. He smashed his fists together.

Behind him, a Catkin man licked his lips. "What do you imagine we'll fetch once we're clear of this hellhole?" he purred.

He inspected his claws idly. Nils shrugged.

"They'd be fools to deny you the number one spot, Lord Fennick!" crooned a Snake-eyed lady. She hissed laughter, forked tongue flickering.

"Well," said the Catkin, shrugging. "I'd hate to be accused of false modesty. So I'd have to agree." He smirked.

Nils looked up. Saw light streaking across the sky. "Looks like it's time for more treasure-drops," he said.

"Just one this time?" said the snake-lady, squinting. She giggled. "They haven't forgotten the rest of us, have they?"

But it wasn't a white comet. But a black one. And it made no sound as it streaked across the sky.

It came closer. The thing had no aura at all—stranger and stranger…

It landed at Fennick's feet.

And unraveled to reveal an amulet. Gold-spun wire, linking to cradle a single tear-drop gemstone. It sparkled pale blue and snow-white. A glistening mist flowed off it, staining the air…

A notification popped up before them:

Treasure received!
??? [???]
Sent from: ???

"Strange," mused Fennick. He picked it up, holding it up to close inspection. His ears twitched. "I don't—"

The gemstone sank through his skin.

The Catkin shuddered. Staggered. And dropped like a rag doll, eyes rolling back.

The snake-lady let out a cry. "Lord Fennick!"

She knelt down beside him, started shaking him, but he didn't stir.

"Shit," snarled Nils. "What in the Nine Hells was that?!"

"I—I'm not sure—"

She turned Fennick over. And screamed.

Fennick's teeth were locked in a bared smile. His eyes were already open, as wide as they could be, shot through with red cracks. His pupils had changed color. Gone a hollow white.

The snake-lady flinched away, staggering back—

And Fennick's body rose. Looked around slowly, mechanically. Turned his neck side-to-side. Turned the head too far, swiveling behind its back, and a series of *CRACK-CRACK-CRACKs* rang out—bones breaking.

A pause. Then the head went back to normal.

Fennick inspected himself. His clawed fingers, mouth wide open. He wiggled them about, as though for the first time. Drool leaking from his lips. He gurgled.

Laws flared at those dagger-sharp ends.

Neither of the Thainish there could fathom what they were looking at. They had no way to tell the Law streaming off those claws was a fully-fused Tier-4 Law—as close to Tier 5 as it could possibly be. Loaded with High-Tier Concepts. On the borderline of Ascension.

An Aura erupted from Fennick's body. And the two of them choked.

It felt to them like their whole bodies were drenched in frostbite—a frost that seeped far past the skin, dug deep into the bones, froze even the soul… the water in the air started to freeze. Then the air itself, all around them, making horrible *CRACK-CRACK*-ing sounds. Frost raced out across the land, raced up the Thainish's skin—and at the epicenter of it was the creature once known as Fennick.

The aura pouring off him contained far more essence than any Core creature should have. More than Nascent, even.

The Thainish fighters sagged to their knees.

Fennick flexed his hands casually. A black ice seethed at his claw-tips, a rotted ice, hissing, steaming at the air. He staggered around. As though unused to moving on two legs. But with every passing second he only gained more and more coordination…

"My lord—" gasped the Snake-lady.

Fennick slashed. The instant his claws made contact her whole body froze stiff. The water in her eyeballs froze in her skull—then the claws sank all the way through. A casual swipe, and the head blew.

There was no blood. It was like decapitating a statue.

Where the claws passed, the world tore open. Voids screaming in long jagged ribbons.

Nils roared. Threw himself forward in a staggering, lumbering charge.

Fennick merely tapped. A pointer finger stabbing at the heart, and the elephant-man froze. Slumped. Shattered into many, many pieces—

Pieces that fell away.

That gentle poke had ripped open a void so wide it sucked in the elephant-man whole. Until there wasn't a trace left—it had gone somewhere even essence couldn't return from…

The Catkin licked his lips.

Then frowned. Inspected his arms again.

The skin there was starting to flake off.

It was too much power for this form to handle. The creature would have to be fast.

Its eyes narrowed.

"Zane Walker…" it hissed. Smiled too-wide.

Then it lunged across the floor. Sprinting for the staircase. Knowing even now that staircase was curving upward, diverting, shortening the path between it and its prey. Its fingers trailed frostbite-black lines over the air, and the wind that rustled by froze there mid-gust, unmoving, as though frozen in time.

***

Evergreen Grove
World Tree Faction

"It is done," intoned Inquisitor Thaele.

Lan let out a tight breath. Massaged his brow. "And you've made certain to take precautions? Made certain you've left no trail?"

Thaele nodded. "Gilgorath blocked off all perception to that realm. Cloaked the drop. It will seem like a stray Malignant Soul breaking into the floor, and possessing the Thainish. Entirely Gilgorath's doing. The other Factions will assume it found another loophole."

Lan set his jaw. "Alright."

Thaele considered his boss in silence.

"Spit it out," said Lan.

"This was unlike you." Thaele's eyes glinted.

"I realize that." Lan's jaw worked. "I would not have taken the risk if I did not believe it was absolutely necessary. If Zane Walker makes it through—and with him, the Mistress Maker… it would be catastrophic. She's dangerous. Cleverer than we'd assumed. Make no mistake! If the two of them survive—as they seemed likely to—they could topple the very standing of our House! We are in dire straits, Inquisitor."

Lan caught himself. "*Were* in dire straits."

He closed his eyes. "Now it is behind us, Fate willing…"

***

Guild of Endless Shadows
Headquarters

The Guild of Endless Shadows' headquarters was a castle on the

Planet of Endless Shadow—a planet with no light save for one source. A moon that hung full and bright at all hours of the day. The sun never rose here.

In that castle, there was a vast gothic hall. Torches burned white, ghostly, flickering, welded onto brimstone pillars. It was a place void of color save black and white—except for the red carpet leading up to the throne, whose surface seemed to move, flowing sluggishly, like blood pumped from some a diseased heart.

A man sat atop a high throne at the end of it. A throne the color of obsidian and poison and bruises, black-purple. He wore a cape of raven feathers. When you looked at his face it seemed perfectly ordinary. But look away and you wouldn't be able to remember a single feature. You wouldn't be able to describe him if you tried.

He was the Patriarch of the Guild of Endless Shadows. The Nameless King.

At first, there was no movement save for the flickering of the torches and the crackling of the fire… then a thick shadow coalesced on the carpet.

When it vanished, there knelt a figure in a blank obsidian mask. A scout.

“Your highness,” rasped the scout. “I have news.”

“Speak,” said the Nameless King.

“There was an interruption in the Superdungeon’s transmission. When it resumed it appears our number one prospect, the Thainish Catkin Fennick, was corrupted by a malignant spirit.” The figure paused. “A spirit of at least Ascended power. There were no witnesses. All dead. Gone.”

The Nameless King cocked his head.

“But with black-matter scrying, we *were* able to piece together one scene,” continued the scout, “Directly after the possession. It appears this Monster was dropped there via cursed treasure. It appears to be the work of the Demon Gilgorath. We know it appears to be racing to hunt down Zane Walker. Gilgorath means to eliminate this Integration’s top two candidates—at once.”

At last, the Nameless King spoke. In a deep booming voice.

“I was not aware Gilgorath had gained such influence over its prison.”

“Circumstances have shifted. The river of Fate flows ever-onward. The Yin forces only waxes as the Chaos Cycle nears its peak—the System only wanes…”

A silence.

“Perhaps,” said the King at last. He steepled his spindly fingers, eyes narrowed. “Perhaps.”

He had his suspicions. But that was all. “You may go.”

The shadows, and the scout, melted away.

The King mulled it over some more.

Then he produced a scrying glass. Tapped the surface. And contacted a very old friend.

"Noughtfire," he said. "You'll want to hear this."

***

Reina was quite close to her third Concept. Evan and Avery were up to Level 280 and 270 respectively.

They were all ready to get going.

Zane and his friends carried on. They descended the wide staircase at the bottom floor of the Citadel, leading down into a tunnel of ash and brimstone and smog. But soon it gave way to softer, loamier stuff—browns, clumps of rich dirt.

Until eventually they were trekking down an earthy tunnel. Giant root networks started running across the ceiling, ribbing the walls. Reina noted how much life she felt here, how dense the Wood and Earth essence here was. She was surprised.

You have entered: Primeval Jungle of Zol
Floor 77

Four layers deeper this time.

The air was thick with humidity. Soon the tunnel started arching off, breaking toward the surface. Things only got muggier and muggier.

They came out above ground.

They saw something out of a prehistoric era. They were surrounded by an overgrown forest—trees whose warm brown trunks were double, triple the width they should be, tall as skyscrapers, studded with bark-like armor plates. Even the ferns around them struck up like towers, their fronds blocking out the sky…

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250. The Temple of Zol (I)

The grass went up to Zane's thighs. The vines were thick as his arms, the flowers as big as Evan was—Evan had trouble seeing, so he just scampered after Zane's legs. Everything was in monstrous proportion.

The jungle came alive with a great hissing, a shrill screeching, a buzzing so loud it sent clumps of dirt jumping down the meadow.

Huge shadows drifted across them. Moths whose deep-blue wings spanned some thirty-odd feet, splattered with hypnotic swirling patterns. Their eyes had twenty sides. Each one seemed to be staring at them, glimmering greedily.

Great Mothra (Monster)

Essence Level 318

Then the underbrush began to rustle. Red gleams shone through the murk. Light slicking off of fangs tipped vivid, venom green.

Thornback Serpent (Monster Knight)

Essence Level 331

Spikes jutted out of bark-scales. Muscles bulged all down a freight train of a body. And half a dozen more came through, sagging into the ground, trailing ditches wide as riverbeds.

Then from behind them came a rumbling, a stomping, and yet more huge beasts broke through the underbrush—

Man-Eater Bloom (Monster)

Essence Level 325

Twelve-foot-tall flowers, crawling around on pale fleshy roots as though they were octopi. Their petals were vibrant yellows and reds and purples. Their mouths lay at the center, where the pistil should be—rows and rows of spinning jagged teeth, drooling puddles of hissing acid sap.

It was as though half the Jungle had smelled their blood. And come to feast.

Zane took in all those hostile auras around him—all those Nascent Souls. The most Nascent Monsters they'd ever come across. All clumped in one big horde. Hemming them in. Closing in fast. As Reina and Evan and Avery huddled close, nervous, backing up to him in a little circle, trying to keep them all in their sights—those auras swelled like rogue waves. Threatening to swamp them, to sweep them off the face of the realm…

Then Zane's Axes dropped into the world.

A size bigger than before, a thick slab of steel, a muted gray, yet pure—not a single blemish in that alloy. The color of the bones of the Titan Rhinoceros.

Just by looking at it, you could tell it was immensely durable. The same way you could tell that about Zane at a glance. It simply gave that same sense.

The Axe burned blinding hot at the edge, slicked with a purple so hot it wounded the air around it, cast a warping halo that turned everything within a five-foot-radius into a slurry of warbling colors...

Zane's body powered up. Coursing for the first time with Nascent Soul strength. And instantly he felt the difference. His essence jumped out to him first. It was imbued with a sense of himself, a denser fuel, and it ran through every part of him—powering every muscle fiber, every tendon, coursing through his bones, his skin—granting all of him a new strength, a sense of utter steadfastness. Endurance. The power to last.

More than ever, Zane's body embodied his soul. Himself.

That sense flared in his Soul Weapon too. The tip of his Axe flared with Stormfire intensity, shining so bright it felt like staring at a sliver of sun. Its power had a new solidness, a new thickness—it could not be compared to his essence before this. It was akin to the difference between coursing water and mere mist.

And at last his full aura blasted out of him.

Rising to confront all of those Monsters, closing in on their wide circle, pouring on the pressure… and it was like those rogue waves ran straight into a cliff face, unyielding—breaking against it—and all they could do was retreat, flee back.

Zane's aura stood unmoved. It made its mark on the world. It was in every sense the essence of Zane.

He looked around. Flexed his fist. Nodded.

For a moment the Monster wave sloshed at the front. Stuttering, hesitating at the sight of him. At the feeling. Unsure just what to do about him.

Then one of them screeched. Another snarled— stomped—and their innermost natures, the hatred at the bottoms of their twisted souls, took hold again.

They rushed him.

The Great Mothra hissed, sprayed a glitter cloud as dazzling in the Astral Plane as the physical. The Man-Eater Flowers began to charge, teeth making vicious spiraling whirlpools, gobs of sickly digestive fluid splattering out, dissolving all they touched—out came the serpents too, jaws unhinging, scythe-like fangs sharpened to the tiniest of points—

Avery and Evan cried out, stood at the ready, bracing for impact. Reina marshaled her healing, breathing faster—

Zane struck. With a very old Skill.

Rising Storm Slash.

Skill up!

Rising Storm Slash [Common (E) -> Mythic (E)]

And the ends of his Axes shot to thermonuclear heights.

He clamped his fists around his Chains. Braced hard. And exerted himself in full—he heaved in one massive pull.

He bellowed.

His Axes moved.

It was not a sudden thing. His new Axes were tremendous weights at the end of those Chains, carrying a tremendous inertia. Even Zane had to tap into a good deal of his strength to move them. But when Zane heaved they stirred, like great beasts waking from long slumbers…

They moved, and shook the world.

There was a vast shrieking, the sound of pure ripping. A shriek that drowned out all other sound. And the air itself split in two. The world split down the middle, shredding up at the tip of Zane's Axes—and everything in it split too.

One blinding purple line carved through the air making an arc. A single flat dimension, a single color, imposing itself over all that chaos. Making things brutally simple.

A beat.

Then the Serpents fell. The Moths descended. The flowers—even the great trees behind them—did not just come apart. They were blasted apart. They were separated with such force it was like their halves were shot out of cannons pointing opposite ways. Thick lakes of bubbling fluids, winding translucent intestines, strange green-purple-veined organs dangled useless in the air; you could see all these things for just a second.

Then a blaze of furious purple swallowed them all up. Then like mere memories, they were lost to the force of the destruction.

The light faded.

There was nothing left.

It looked a lot like the last floor actually. Ash and slag, a wide circle of it, a vast blackened clearing cut out for hundreds of feet around. The trees at the far ends were toppled over, blackened down their lengths, wobbling as they were trying to lean as far away as they could from the source of all that destruction.

From Zane.

A sea of raw essence poured into him.

Level up!

Level up!

Essence Level 300 -> 302

Zane blinked. He wasn't sure how many Nascent Monsters that was, but it had to be at least two dozen… That was almost three Levels. He almost would've expected more.

It seemed all that essence condensed could only make a little of his. It was a difference in the quality of their Nascent Souls.

He looked around, inspecting his handiwork. He was pleased.

He turned to see three pairs of blinking wide-eyes behind him. Well—two pairs that he could see. Avery had taken to preemptively putting on sunglasses when he seemed about to do his thing. She slowly pulled them off. Then it was three. "Well… dang!" she said, inspecting the ashes. "You really gave them the business, huh…"

"I do not think this floor will be very hard," said Zane.

***

They went around and collected all those dropped Weapon Souls. They mostly went to Zane's friends, who he thought needed them more. After how many it took Zane to level his Soul Weapon once, he figured these would not make much of a difference. And he had a feeling a lot more was coming his way anyways. Evan and Avery and Reina all got a few Levels each there.

Unlike the last floor, this one was not barren. The forest was actually teeming with treasures. The nice thing about wrecking all those Monsters was all the stuff they had been guarding was not guarded anymore. So as they ambled about, they kept picking up treasures as they went.

The first was something called 'Sap of the Ancients'. One out of every twenty or so trees seemed to have a deposit of it—it collected over the course of thousands of years, apparently.

After drinking a few vials of it, it got his friends up to the high 280s. Zane got another level too.

Level up!

Essence Level 302 -> 303

***

It turned out Zane was right. It was pretty easy going through all of the next section.

First, he turned to his mini-map. Saw where the compass was pointing. Took out an Axe. And just threw it in that direction.

It sliced straight through a giant tree—which burst into Stormfire and collapsed to ashes in a matter of blinks. Then another. Then another. It just kept going, mowing down trees like common grass, vanishing into the distance. There was much booming, and shaking, and exploding. It seemed nothing that Zane's Axe came across could do much to resist.

Skill up!

Rising Storm Slash II -> III

It made for a neat little path for them to follow. They went along it.

Whenever a Monster thought it was a good idea to trouble them, Zane sliced it. The more they went, the fewer Monsters thought it was a good idea. There was one—a weird butterfly with giant fake-eyes on its wings. It decided to stay high up and just spray them with glittering soul attacks. But Zane's Red Shield Pagoda shucked it off. It was much closer to hand now that his soul was so present in his body. Blocking came easy. And these basic Nascent Soul attacks still could not come close to him.

He tossed his Axe. Missed—the Axe raced deep into the sky, exploded a cloud layer, and kept going. He frowned. Chucked his Axe again, harder, and this time only missed by a few yards. The thing was weirdly nimble.

He turned to Evan.

"Bird," said Zane, pointing at it. "Help."

Evan gave it a good bink. Shot a nice big hole right in the middle of its wing. And as it started screeching and dropping, Zane chopped it in two.

Nice.

Along the way, they kept collecting Levels.

So many trees here were thick with yellow dots. They gathered some more sap, slurping them as they went.

Level up!

Essence Level 303 -> 304

Lots of fruit all around. There were Golden Apples full of light essence that helped Evan Level especially. Every so often they'd come across a small gnarled wizened tree, all-white bark and white leaves, which contained something called a 'Fruit of Knowledge'—a bushel of Earth A-ranked Law treasures. Like better Law Fruits. They pocketed them.

It was turning out to be a nice stroll. Like a little hike in some nature preserve, except the nature preserve was of a time when dinosaurs still roamed. It was a pretty cool place once you got past all the Monsters.

They came across a clearing with something called a 'Yellow Spring of Reincarnation.'

Taking a dip in it healed a lot of their soul fatigue. Zane was still out of commission in terms of comprehension. For Fire specifically—even his soul could only take being burned so often. He felt Steel, Rhinoceros Bloodline skills might come a bit easier. But he was still a little tired there too.

The spring helped restore a lot. It felt like waking from a deep restful sleep.

They moved on.

Soon they ended up at the end of the section. The choke point of the jungle. Before them lay the biggest tree they had come across so far, towering so high its canopy struck deep into the clouds.

The tree came to life. Two eyes and a mouth materialized on the bark, looming tall over Zane and friends. The Monster roared, branches quivering, sending little jet streams scurrying across the air.

Elderwood Treant (Monster Knight)

Essence Level 341

Its aura flared out. Blanketing the world.

Zane's flared out too. And crushed its aura nicely.

It stared at Zane. Zane stared back at it.

It shrieked.

Rising Storm Slash struck twice.

Level up!

Essence Level 304 -> 305

They moved on.

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251. The Temple of Zol (II)

Soon they came across a yellow dot on the mini-map amid a heap of fallen jumbo-sized trees. A beehive the size of a treehouse. Knocked over, leaking the treasure.

Golden Honey [Earth (A)]
The premier source of nourishment for the Golden Wasp. An essence-rich treasure.

Zane left most of it to his friends. He was getting plenty of essence just from Monster stomping. And they were all making good progress toward Nascent—getting pretty close. He would feel a lot better when they also got there. Zane could attest the difference was pretty big.

Actually…

He looked around at the whole area—all the trees spread out about them. Still teeming with Monsters.

He scratched his head. He wasn't sure why he was in so much of a rush, now that he thought about it...

He took out his axes. Savage Edge lit the ends. Nothing had managed to slow them yet.

He tossed one to his left—there was a crashing, a booming, a shrieking of insects and bird-Monsters, a great tumbling—lines of trees falling over, exploding one after another, racing into the distance.

A good thirty seconds later, it came to a shuddering halt. And then —

Level up!
Essence Level 305 -> 306

Nice.

He did this another few times. Just chucking out his axe, and seeing what could stop him.

Nothing could stop him.

That was how he collected a handful of easy Levels on their way to the next section. And how he hollowed out vast swathes of the floor. He had never collected so much essence so easily.

Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 306 -> 308

They took a few detours, cut around to treasure areas. Harvested

more of those giant beehives full of essence honey, and slurped happily. Really this floor was turning out to be one big treasure area. Zane wasn't even pumped as he went about it. It was more like a stroll for him.

Reina wondered why this floor was going so easy. Maybe whatever Monster trying to kill Zane couldn't find enemies that could stand up to him? Or maybe it had just… given up? She wasn't sure.

They kept ambling along. It wasn't long before they got to the next section.

The trees started fading away. Stone totems started cropping up, pillars etched full of inscrutable symbols. Wings, heads of beasts of prey. Smooth stone slabs started littering the ground at random. Soon they started linking to vague paths.

They followed along, and—

You have entered:
Section 1-2: The Temple of the Seer of Zol

A vine-riddled stone temple lay before them. Like something out of an ancient long-lost civilization. Giant serious-looking stone heads flanked the entrance.

A big yellow blot lay right in the middle of it. A treasure area.

A notification popped up:

Enter, mortal, and glimpse the truth of your future! The end of your Path, and what it will take to achieve it… So says the Seer of Zol.

It was made of big slabby stone blocks. There were mosaics carved of simple brushstrokes. Mythical beasts—three-headed lions, burly gods riding storm-clouds. A kind of pantheon, making a massive mural stretching from stone after stone. At the center of it all was a Cyclops in what looked to be a toga. One eye stared straight at them. It was holding up a three-fingered palm, some kind of gesture, as though casting a spell.

They neared the temple. Neared those two big stone heads.

The heads promptly came to life.

But they had barely moved when two flaming hammers fell upon them with all the wrath of Zane.

The heads promptly were put to death.

Zane nodded at the ruins, satisfied. He had come to not trust big stone statues guarding things. His intuition turned out to be correct.

Sneaky. They were quite bird-like in that way.

…Maybe that was why they rubbed him the wrong way, now he thought about it…

The compass on the mini-map showed they would have to go

through this Temple to get to the other side. The path Zane's Axe had blazed, ended here.

There was no big clusters of red dots running through the Temple. Nothing sinister-feeling. Just that one treasure area in the middle of it. It was almost too calm.

He looked to Reina, scratching his head. He wondered what was up with the place. He couldn't make much sense of that notification. She wasn't sure either. Avery put her hands on her hips, squinted for a bit. But she didn't sense any obvious death-traps.

It did seem weird, though. When Zane focused in on it, really felt the place with his soul, he felt a bit of warbling in the Astral Plane. There was a Concept there, maybe a Law, that he was not sure he had seen much before.

It felt like pretty high-up stuff. It kind of felt like the subtle auras some scrying glasses or portals gave off. But cranked up much stronger.

They all blinked at the thing for a bit longer.

Zane shrugged.

Whatever the case, he was pretty sure if he came across something unexpected he could smash it without much trouble.

He led the way up a flight of mossy, vine-laced steps. This time nothing attacked them. They went in.

The air inside was cool. The humidity dried up instantly as they passed between the mossy columns. It was as though they had entered a new dimension. Torches lit the walls, which crawled up those mosaics—they were all linking to form some kind of long-winded story, Reina thought.

Their footsteps echoed past stone halls, barren save for moss and vine. The only other things there were the statues—little gold ones on little marble pedestals.

Idol of Zol [Earth (A)]

Zane's belly growled.

Hm.

He grabbed one, inspected it.

This was good metal.

They seemed to be some kind of god. Very serious-looking fellow. He stuck the head in his mouth and took a nibble.

It was surprisingly tasty. Zane's sense of taste had changed more and more the longer he took in Titan Rhino blood. Metals did not taste rusty and stale anymore. They all became various flavors of sweet. Some, like steel, tasted like rock candy and sugar. Silver tasted like licorice. Gold dissolved in his mouth. These, however, were like chocolate. It had been quite a while since he had good chocolate.

He finished it off in three big chomps.

After a few—

Skill up!
Divine Titan's Heart I -> II

They kept going. Getting closer and closer to that big yellow dot in the very middle. Soon an open archway lit the distance. A gale of rich essence streamed out. The temple was opening up to some new area.

There were two more big heads guarding it. They barely had a chance to come to life before Zane smashed them.

They passed through the final archway.

You have entered: Section 1-3
Garden of Fate

It felt like they were wading into a lake of pure essence. So much filled the air the atmosphere could have been its own low-grade Earth treasure.

It all came from the flowers. Spread out across the breadth of the Garden, going in dizzying spirals.

Their petals were translucent, made of faintly pastel colors. And their centers seemed like motes of pure light. There was something ethereal about them, something ghostly—like if you touched on them, blew on them, they might just dissolve into the wind.

A description popped up.

The Garden of Fate was the most prized treasure of the Seer of Zol. It is currently in full bloom. Within lie Elemental flowers which contain deeply held Law secrets and essence stores alike—though the deepest secrets here can only be uncovered by those meant to find them…

They all took a few moments to take it all in. The flowers were all pretty eye-catching. A few were of particular interest—

Gaia's Embrace [Earth (A)]

It was a clutch of Wood-Element ferns. Perfect for Reina. She was pretty close to her third Concept—she had been chipping away at it for a few days now.

Then there were—

Dandelions of Ra [Earth (A)]

It was like sunshine captured in physical form. Motes of it glowing on the edges of swaying flowers that were little more than tricks of light. Evan gasped.

A few were limpid lilies, trickling freshwater off their petals.

Moonwater Lilies [Earth (A)]

Avery pounced.

His friends needed a lot less essence than Zane to level up. Just these might get them to Nascent. Evan was already pretty close to Level 300—they were all Leveling pretty fast, it felt like.

This third floor was turning out pleasantly so far.

They decided to stay for a bit and soak in all the treasures here. With how far they'd gone along, Reina felt this could be one of the last chances to rest and power-up before they went for the finish.

She called a meeting. "Let's make the most of this," she said brightly, looking at all of them. "I'll get as close to mid-Fusion as I can. You should too, Avery."

"Yes ma'am!" said Avery with a salute.

"Evan—let's take those dandelions and push for Nascent, okay?"

"Okay!" said Evan.

"Zane…" she paused, pursed her lips. There wasn't really much he could break through on right now, it felt like. They blinked at each other. "…You're doing great," she said at last, and gave him a pat on the arm.

"Thanks," said Zane.

In the end Zane sat Evan down and gave him a pep talk on how to do the breakthrough. Most of it ended up boiling down to "try very, very, hard."

"Okay!" said Evan.

They went off to do their things.

Zane found a few Fire- and Steel-element flowers. And ate. The Steel Flowers—'Ironhead Tulips'—got him another Skill Level.

Skill up!
Divine Titan's Heart II -> III

After that there wasn't much for him to do but wait, he supposed.

He wandered deeper in. Through spiraling routes of flowers, not quite sure where he was going. Just poking around idly. Soon he was convinced he'd gotten totally lost. This was with a mini-map on him. Even Zane was not sure how he managed to do this.

That was when he came across the hill.

It had no other flowers on it. Just a plain of grass, leading up to the very top. Where there was just a single flower.

Fatebloom [Earth (S+)]
Consume this flower, mortal, and glimpse the end of the Path.

Zane remembered—the message in the temple description. Way back at the very start of this thing. Something about the end of his Path. He shuffled up to it, gently picked the flower. It did not feel, or

look, or smell particularly dangerous.

He considered it for a bit. Then shrugged, and swallowed it.

Instantly he started feeling sleepy. As though he'd been struck by a spell.

He frowned. He could fight this he sensed. His Soul Pagoda was starting to act up, ready to respond—but it did not feel harmful to him. Instead it just felt like it wanted to show him something.

So he tamped down on his Pagoda, and his urge to resist. He let the flower do its thing.

The feeling washed over him. Zane swayed on his feet, eyelids drooping. He yawned, blinked. He felt a little…

He dropped face-first into the ground.

THUMP. The whole hill shook with the impact.

He was snoring in seconds.

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252. The Temple of Zol (III)

For a while there was only grayness. Grayness spreading to the horizons of Zane's mind. He floated there, blinking at the nothing.

Then—a light.

Stormfire. Deep within. Burning with a familiar strength. The rest all seemed to fade. The flame brightened in his mind…

It was an old flame. Blue. Like back when he'd first put it together.

And slowly echoes faded in around it, ghostly mirages, almost suggestions in the mind, impressions of visions. He saw Stormfire appearing deep in stormclouds, where the lightning grew hottest. Across a hundred, a thousand storms, soon too many to name… that same color. Echoing endlessly.

He saw himself. Fists full of the stuff. Pounding in the shells of giant steel beetles. Pounding in ice wolves. Pounding in undead skeletons. Lots of pounding. These were fond memories. He was pleased to see them again; they brought a warm feeling to his chest.

Then the flame began to brighten. Began to change. Began to gain a certain profoundness.

The blue began to brighten. The echoes, the images, shifting, melting into new ones—ghostly lightning striking at the hearts of volcanoes and that blue going to shocking purple, spiking up the spectrum of intensity. A thousand lightning-bolts, striking a thousand flames, a thousand eruptions of magma…

That was his Stormfire now, he saw. And it had gained Concepts he knew. The ferocity of Plasma. The power of Extreme Intensity, the explosive spread of Chain Combustion—

Now Zane saw himself beating up giant crabs, and golems, and that one minotaur.

He liked this highlight reel. It was getting him pumped up—now a part of him wanted to go out and smash more. Maybe when this was over.

The flame only brightened.

Zane remembered how he had gotten Extreme Intensity. Seeing a dying phoenix crash through the heart of a star. Stars—the place where Stormfire was greatest.

That was where this flame was heading, he saw, as it strengthened more and more. Taking his powers to the heavens… beyond past, and present. To something new.

It had gained a new color in the Astral Plane. A new dimension to its aura, a new Concept, an aspect of soul. It would burn there as fiercely as it burned here. It would catch on essence and flesh and life-force with the same intensity. It was a flame from which there was no escape. It would swallow every last part of you.

Zane saw a man, back turned to him. A vague image, an impression in his mind. A big man of striking stature, rippling with muscle. He had long shaggy hair. He was burning up with that new Stormfire. Crushing down a dragon Monster with a stone slab of a head, whose scales were thick as boulders. The flame swallowed the beast one brutal blast—its essence, its flesh, even its soul—destroying it utterly. Feeding the power of the flame, the hunger… the Monster could only screech as its soul went up in smoke.

A flame that burned life and soul and body alike. An all-consuming fire.

The man stood there over the ruins, big fists clenched, breathing heavy…

Nice.

Zane wondered who it was. Now Zane was breathing a little heavy too, just watching.

It seemed pretty far out though from where he was now. Pretty advanced.

He would get there, though, he vowed.

The scene faded away—until only that Stormfire was left.

This Stormfire had a sense of completeness to it. He could feel it just looking at it. This must be what a full Fusion felt like.

But it only kept growing—growing, where there was nothing left to grow. It had to evolve. To change form.

To get even bigger.

A new vision: a sun flaring up before Zane. And he saw the Stormfire within.

Changing.

It grew dense. Dense with sheer raw power, solidifying—and Zane felt new Laws, new fields, come into play. Steel Laws—Magnetic fields of immense magnitude, streaming off that star, off all the super-heated steels within, lines of it washing over the Stormfire crisscrossing bearing down, carrying within them great powers. Electricity too—exciting Stormfire to a new stratosphere of power—to a new form entirely—

Something new blasted out of the surface of the sun. Some tongue of super-concentrated kind of Stormfire, one rush of pure power arcing straight out of the heart of the star, breaching the surface of space. And Zane felt a new dimension to it, a violent radiation flaring out, unseen energy scattering to the cosmos, hitting spectra of power he could not begin to understand...

A new vision faded in.

There was that man again. The wrath of a star flaring on his fists, wrestling down a silver-backed, silver-front gorilla Monster—a massive beast made of some metal of untold density, untold power... it was not in a league with any beast Zane had seen. The Laws in its body were past Mid-Fusion. And yet this man's bare fists were melting straight through it. Pitting his muscle against the gorilla's own, tearing the bellowing frothing beast apart with his bare hands.

Zane was getting so pumped up he could almost hear the blood rushing in his ears. He was starting to itch. He wanted to get his own hands on something now.

The man stepped on the chest of the fallen half-melted beast, smashed a star-streaked fist to his chest, let out a triumphant bellow…

Zane blinked.

Hold on.

This man… seemed familiar.

The fight-scene faded away. There was just the Stormfire again, burning in space. Flaring out of the surface of the sun…

Getting bigger, wider until those flares raged across the surface of the star, taking up a huge swathe of it—gaining untold sums of raw power, gaining profound Concepts Zane could not begin to wrap his head around... Just when Zane wasn't sure things could get bigger. They got bigger.

It started projecting a field of heat and radiation so wide you could see it melting voids in space itself, see it burning up distant planets. Astral Lightning raged all over its surface…

He wondered what level of power this was. Did the Patriarchs of those big Sects have power like this?

The big man was back again. An increasingly familiar man to Zane. Zane saw, in flashes and impressions, a vision of him wielding these solar storms. Storms burning down his body, burning through him, firing up the core of him—he was erupting with its power. Eviscerating in three big blasts an army of giant dinosaur-looking Monsters. Fading away, moving faster, scraps of knowledge moving in a faster- and faster- flowing river…

The raw Stormfire faded back in. Zane saw those solar storms spreading until it encompassed the entirety of the star—and just when he thought it couldn't get bigger, brighter, the intensity just couldn't keep ratcheting up—it did…

Until the surface of the star itself began to expand. Began to boil up—and things had reached a critical stage now, a point of unbelievabe high-power. It all started collapsing in on itself—great beams of light streaking toward the center.

The sun exploded.

The amount of heat, amount of energy rippling out, washed over dots of planets— blackened them whole, crushed them, erased them in massive blasts. Vast sectors of space—crushed under the sheer force of it, the sheer heat, the raw power—Zane saw a of white-scaled, three-headed dragon-Monsters.

Streaming with lightning and light laws far above Zane's knowledge. Shooting across the vast sense of space like meteors, screaming, going super-sonic, racing away. Trying to get ahead of that wave of sheer destruction.

He saw monstrous Space-Whales, each as big as a planet, carrying great Monster hordes on their backs—little armies clinging onto them like barnacles—floating through space. They let out roars as blubber sheared off their bodies. After the first heat wave, there were just skeletons; the next wave passed, and they weren't even bones. Just particles released to the universe…

A new scene was fading in. That same man. Holding the power of a collapsed star in his fists. And this time Zane caught a glimpse of his side profile. A big chest. Strong jaw. Dark eyes.

It was Zane.

There was more—the scenes were nowhere near ending—but the flow had gotten too fast now. The scenes were splitting apart, fuzzing up, fading away—Zane tried to cling on. He wanted to see more. But it was fading too fast, swirling into the grayness…

He growled in frustration. But he lost it.

He was left there in the nothing. Breathing fast. Hands twitching, heart hammering. Trying to make sense of what he just saw.

That would be his future. It was nowhere near finished. But that level of power…

It was not something you could get at Level 500, he knew. He did not think that was Level 600-power either. That…

The world was very big. Bigger than he thought.

Then even the grayness faded away, and he blinked some more.

He appeared to be face-down in some dirt. This did not faze him, as it was a position he found himself in quite often. He rolled over. Blinked at the air, at nothing. Thinking. Heart still pumping, still breathing heavy.

After a while he sat up.

He ambled back to Reina in a bit of a daze. She had just finished up a meditation—she smiled, gave him a kiss, said she'd gotten close to her Concept. She would take a little break the next day or two. Then make a final push—she was pretty sure she would get it. After her Fourth Evolution her comprehension speed had shot up yet another grade—it might be the fastest of anyone Zane knew except for himself now.

Then she studied his face. He was pretty sure his face was not really different than usual. But she seemed to have a sixth sense for him; she could tell just looking at him. She could tell when something had gotten into him. Her brow furrowed. “What is it?”

“I will become bigger,” he informed her.

She looked a bit puzzled.

She said she thought he seemed a little agitated. Like he needed to blow off some steam.

He blinked at her. She blinked at him.

They stumbled off to do some Leveling.

Level up!

Essence Level 308 -> 309

***

The creature once known as Fennick let out a shriek. A shriek of laughter but it sounded like a crowd, all screaming at once.

It was racing up the floors. Up to the Water-World of Thora now, Floor 71—a world covered in 98% ocean…or it had been.

From a bird’s eye view, it would seem the whole blue surface was being wiped over by a line of frosty black. Crackling over with black seething ice as a creature with powers beyond this world raced across its surface at blistering speeds. Shredding anything that dared get in its way with casual swipes.

Soon… it laughed.

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253. Third Floor's End (I)

Hours later…

It turned out Evan managed his Nascent Soul evolution.

“I did it!” he beamed.

He did a little show and tell. He sped around everywhere, a little ray of sunshine bouncing off the walls. His aura spilled over with warm happy feelings. He crashed into Zane a few times but that was okay. When Zane’s body was relaxed, not in full fight-mode, he was more of a firm pad than a hard wall.

Evan had been a little mopey these past few days after he had been whacked by that Storm Titan. Zane had actually been getting a little concerned. But it seemed Evan had bounced all the way back, and then some. Zane gave him a pat on the head.

Apparently Evan had been through quite a journey. It was nothing like Zane’s own breakthrough. Midway through Evan’s breakthrough, he had gotten quite scared. He kept remembering getting whacked. Then he had some kind of vision where he had to fight his evil doppelganger. At first it was very scary. He had to remember what he was fighting for—to help those in need. That got him all determined again, and he won. In the end, he’d learned an important life lesson.

Zane wasn’t really sure what that was all about. But the gist of it was Evan seemed okay now.

Evan’s Nascent Soul grade was up there—peak Profound, just shy of Heaven-Grade.

By the end of their little training session, Avery ended up pretty close to her Concept too—something to do with mirroring bouncing back attacks. Just a little more and she would make it. She was a little miffed she didn’t get it this time. She was bumbling around with her hoodie strings all drawn up, making sad noises. This also meant she ran into Zane a few times. She was soon okay too though.

Zane figured once they got to the end of this floor and collected what Levels were left, they would all be pretty close to Nascent.

By the time they made their way onward, they were all in good spirits. Out of the temple, toward the last staircase.

***

They weren’t met with much trouble on the way.

A few living-stone statues Zane quickly smashed. But that was pretty much it—they found surprisingly few red dots on the mini-map.

They all kept their eyes peeled.

But it was as though the Monsters had just vanished.

Reina's brow furrowed. "Strange," she muttered.

Things only got stranger from there.

It had gotten dark out in the time they'd been inside. A host of black clouds was brewing overhead… It was getting cold. Fast. Every hundred feet they went, it seemed to drop another dozen or two degrees.

As they went along, the trees started to wilt all around them. Shriveling, hunching over, darkening, like very old decrepit creatures —the farther along they went, the more shriveled the forest got. The colder things got.

The dark clouds thickened overhead.

"Look!" said Evan, pointing.

Black snowflakes, falling from the sky.

Stranger and stranger…

The grounds were frosting over all around them. Frosted over with black crystals, as though caked in frozen soot. The trees faded away, the land flattened out…

You didn't need Reina to know something wasn't right here.

They went ahead cautiously.

There were no auras that Zane could detect anywhere. Not even from the fallen trees or the shriveled grasses. Nothing lived. It was like an awful blizzard had passed through here and left nothing but wasteland behind.

It was so cold now their bodies had to work, burning essence to fight off the chill.

The land was flattening out. The biome, changing decisively. Up ahead there was just a frozen tundra. All frost creeping over black ice, ice that crept up your feet if you stood still on it for just a moment—a cold they could feel even through their boots. Going on and on, melting into a deep gray horizon.

Lightning forked across the distant sky, fading fast. No thunder. No sound at all. A deathly silence.

Then at last—in the far distance—they saw just one figure. Hunched over, it looked like. A dot, miles away.

And red translucent walls flared up behind them.

Lair Lock!
Clearance condition:
Slay ???
(0/1)

His friends stiffened at once.

Then—"Oh, come on!" cried Avery, throwing up her hands.

"…I was worried this might happen," said Reina darkly.

It had happened to them before. Up until then, they'd all been kind of waiting for the hammer to drop.

But they weren't as nervous as before. They'd settled down now. They'd all Leveled up. They all knew they could handle whatever this dungeon threw at them.

And after Zane's last power-up, after he showed his strength here, Reina and Evan and Avery felt more secure and safe with him there than ever before—Reina met his eyes, nodded to him, encouragingly. Even without Sage Mind he could see how much she trusted him—it was plain in the way she looked at him. She had always had a deeply-held kind of faith in him. It warmed him.

That was his promise to his friends, he felt. An unsaid promise, but he held himself fiercely to it. Whatever happened—whatever they came across—he would always rise to meet it. He would carry the world for them if he had to.

Zane set his jaw.

They began to march across the plateau. For what they all knew would be the final battle.

The icy ground started flaking away all around them. Huge chunks peeling off, like dead skin shedding. Strange trails meandered through the air. When the black snow passed through, it stilled. Slowed to a halt, suspended in air. Chunks of ice, soft gusts of wind—held there by some unseen force, peppering the world around them. Like even gravity was frozen at certain points.

It had gotten so cold now his friends were all shivering a little. They could handle it—their Bloodlines were quite strong. They had to burn some to resist it. Even Zane. This was a biting cold, a cold that gnawed at you from all sides…

He frowned.

The deeper in they got, the more he felt the presence of a Law.

A Law that didn't feel on a level with any they had fought so far. Something that felt like it did not belong in this world. Zane remembered when he had just seen the complete Stormfire—the kind that incinerated body and soul, that lived in the heart of stars… this felt sort of like that.

And that did give him some pause.

Zane stepped out in front. "Stay behind me," he said firmly.

Watching the huddled figure as they came closer and closer... Reina nodded, biting her lip. She started powering up, getting ready to heal him. Evan and Avery both got their weapons out, shivering a little. But ready.

Just a hundred-odd paces out now. And the Boss was coming into view.

??? (Monster Grand Knight)
Essence Level 399

They all stiffened at that.

It looked like a man. Tall and sinewy, with cat-ears and a long spiked tail. Crouched over.

Something about that aura, though, was unlike anything Zane had ever felt. It did not merely give off a pressure.

That aura was so tangible it could not be called an aura. He did not know what it was—it was more like a field. A field that carried its powers far and wide, blanketing everything unfortunate enough to stand in its presence. Everything within, the grounds, the skies, the very air—frosted over. Even the wind passing through it slowed down. As though it was imposing its own little world on this realm. Its own reality.

Essence and Law saturated that space so thickly they nearly felt physical. Wiping out all other kinds of essence, other Laws, that dared enter its territory. Making a dead zone… that was what had changed this world.

It seemed to be eating as they arrived. Its back was still turned, bleak juices dribbling off of it.

Before it lay an Elephant Monster.

Elder Mammoth (Monster Grand Knight)
Essence Level 363

Thick runes ran down its trunk, mapping patterns onto its back—patterns glowing weakly. The beast was shrunken. Withered. Mouth gaping, rheumy eyes unseeing. Nearly reduced to a corpse, torn completely open. Its organs, its blood, were missing. Its insides were a frozen wasteland.

The Elephant-Monster looked like it belonged to this world—it looked like it was supposed to be a final Boss.

The thing that was eating it did not look like it belonged to this world.

But it was feasting noisily, slurping in the entrails. It only grew stronger.

Evan let out a little squeak. Reina's breath caught.

The sense of wrongness just kept growing—an instinctual feeling, deep in the bones. Everything was wrong. The sky, the earth, this creature...

Zane just frowned.

It turned. Its black teeth were all stained red. Its smile seemed too wide to fit in its mouth. Its eyes were looking two separate ways.

Reina paled.

I have been waiting… Zane Walker… it croaked. It moved

haltingly, like it was not used to its body. Its head listed heavy to one side.

Its claws spread out. And the ends of them, those wickedly sharp points, were so dense with Law and Essence they made little stars of frostbite. The air cracked around them as they moved, leaving frozen, shattered trails….

The Monster shrieked. Its aura exploded.

And it felt like they'd all been plunged into the bottom of a freezing lake.

Zane felt his friends all lock up behind him, spike up in fear—a feeling that crashed over them with the cold, that went after their very souls, made them feel like they were suffocating and drowning and freezing, all at once—

Even for Zane just moving, thinking, was suddenly immensely hard, slowing more every fraction of a second—

Zane narrowed his eyes.

And a red glow burst over him. The image of a moon, bright and strong, stretching to cover as much of his friends as he could. Flaring against that deathly cold. Giving them some relief.

For the first time, he felt his Red Moon Pagoda flickering. Like it had to work to take all that brutal Law-weight. But it held.

Zane bellowed.

And came right back.

His Bloodline ignited.

In that moment, Zane let loose everything. Burned with all he had.

His heart gave a heavy thump. Like an engine jump-starting.

His own Asura aura roared out of him. Skyrocketing in an instant. A searing heat flared up inside him, surged out into the world, lighting up every inch of him—his blood began coursing white-hot, a vital heat rolling off him in fierce waves, smashing against those bitter gales, driving back the blanketing cold—wrestling them to a flickering halt…

It was not what this Monster had. Zane had to ignite everything just to match it. But he did. He looked to his friends, saw his heat washing over them; protecting them; color came back to their faces. They could breathe again.

He stood there. Bearing the weight of it, feeling it gnawing away at his Health, bit by bit—a lone pyre holding back the terrible darkness. He had made a promise.

“Zane!” cried Reina—she was on him in an instant, pouring on healing, buffing—Avery and Evan snapped back too, hefting their weapons at the Monster. Flushed, shaken, but letting out their own little battle-cries.

Zane clenched his fists. And his Chains dropped through. Lit up

with Stormfire.

The creature blinked at him, head cocked. Like Zane was an amusing curiosity.

Such vitality… such life…

It whispered.

My Master says… left alive… you would become… a Champion of the Age… I see it…

It let out a shrill laugh.

Zane Walker… must die.

Its claws unsheathed. Its jaw unhinged.
And it lunged.

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254. Third Floor's End (II)

Steelheart Conclave

The Barbarian Sage crushed his ale tankard in one quivering fist.

"What in the Nine Hells is this?!"

He looked like he wanted to reach through the projection and strangle the System with his bare hands.

"System, you creaky old bastard! Are you blind as well as deaf?!"

The Scouts around him winced. They knew the System was an unthinking machine. That was what all the theory books said, anyway. But some still clung to an old superstition, that it had a soul—that it was some kind of deity. They tried not to profane it.

The Sage was well past the point of caring. He let out a colorful string of curses.

The Monster advanced on Zane. A Monster with powers that belonged nowhere near this floor. A Monster so powerful its host body would expire in hours—you could see its very presence destabilizing reality, shivering where the creature tread…

It had a half-domain—not a full one. But even a half-domain made a world of difference. Zane's body had an immense vitality—as much as any Nascent creature the Sage had ever seen. A vitality surpassing a good chunk of Ascendants. It had to be from his Primordial Nascent Soul.

Even still, they could all see him heaving, working hard to shuck off those Laws. Laws that descended on them like a thousand freezing grasping fingers, trying to dig their way under the skin….

The Sage gritted his teeth. But there was nothing he could do.

The System was a very old machine. It long predated the Dragonspire Galaxy. It didn't only govern this Galaxy. Or the Celestial Imperium that contained it. It governed the whole of the Universe. The Laws it was written in—according to the high seers of the Nameless King—were nearing the Universal Laws.

No one alive could understand them. Much less change them.

Zane and his friends were truly on their own.

"I'll tell you this," gritted the Sage. "If anything happens to him… I'll go through that dungeon, and take my pound of flesh off that sniveling worm myself!"

The Head Scout paled. The sniveling worm, of course, was Gilgorath. None of the Scouts there quite knew what to make of that—

the consequences of such an act… but the Barbarian Sage looked deadly serious.

"You show them what you're made of, Zane," said the Sage. "Hold that head high! Don't you let them bully you!"

***

Zane felt the demon coming.

But he still couldn't stop it.

His punches shot out like a piston now. He was not slow.

But that demon moved like everyone else was underwater, and it strode on land. Like they occupied two different realities.

It left bleak shadowy after-images as it moved—even the way it fell, always a little faster than it should, like gravity pulled on it differently. That dark field about it seemed to grant it its own preferred reality.

And yet as it closed in on Zane, claws descending, as Zane's arm rose to meet it—he could viscerally feel the gap between intent and action. His will, and when his body executed it.

In that window, that little gap of time. It struck.

He watched his fist rise, feeling it move in slow motion, shooting out—still rising as four black claws sank deep into Zane's chest. Raking all the way across in one smooth motion. Screeching as they carved through skin—and ripped into the muscle underneath.

Zane's flesh blackened at just a touch. Gave way beneath an enormous shearing force—beneath Laws that tore through any essence, any Law that got in its path. It was a cold unlike anything Zane had ever felt. A cold so vicious it had his body screaming. The same way the body screams, goes into a sudden panic when you put your hand on a stove—only with the temperatures reversed.

Zane grunted.

He could only trust his body then. The skin took the worst of the Law, that big blast of it on contact. Those claws raked down his muscles. And halted there. Ripping the fibers. Drawing spurts of blood… but the thickness of him, the robustness, the iron-like quality —all that essence burning through him, pumping those fibers full of life, stretching them tight—it stopped the blow from sinking straight into his heart.

Blood fountained out of him.

The Monster slashed again. The other way. Carved a bloody black X deep down his torso.

Only then did Zane's fist arrive, flaring white-hot even as he bellowed.

But the demon was gone the next instant. Blown away on a gust of shrill wind, and he struck nothing.

Then the aftershock hit Zane in full. A brilliant shock of pain ripped

up and down his chest… he hissed. But he could take this pain. Pain had never crippled him.

The damage was less easy to brush off.

His flesh was deadening all along those cuts, and quick. In an instant more than a tenth of his Health instantly vanished. And worse. Those Frostbite Laws stayed behind, festering in the wounds, running rampant over all his essence, his Stormfire, even—spreading visibly, some supernatural rot—

He felt a vicious intent coming his way. Wheeled around—too slow. Felt a third huge spike of pain ripping up his side, he bellowed furiously, hammered out a fist. But the demon had flitted away. Already gone. A hundred strides off, cocking its head at Zane. Inspecting its handiwork.

Zane looked down.

In three quick strokes it had shredded him chest-to-waist.

An icy pain stabbed deep through him. And it wasn't stopping—it was growing, if anything, some awful poison bent on swallowing him whole, creeping rot over hale flesh, trying to make of him a frozen shriveled corpse. He felt his own Stormfire fighting within at the tiniest of levels, burning against that dark tide—but this Law…

It was of a different grade.

And worse—standing in the demon's field was like being trapped in a blizzard. Zane's healing flames flickered in that wind; his body only chilled. The cold sinking into him only grew stronger. He saw it crackling over his skin, freezing him over, snatching away sensation inch by painful inch—

Then Zane's essence, his blood, raged through him.

Reinforcements crashed against the wounds driving them back, fighting them to a standstill—and there he felt the power of a soul merged deeply with flesh. Throwing every last ounce of him into the effort. Fighting a war within, even as he turned to face the enemy without.

Just fighting off the wounds wasted heaps of essence. He was already starting to feel woozy—and that was just the opening blow…

Then Zane felt himself lightening.

Warming—felt a new soul connecting to his own, a soul overflowing with worry, with care. It was Reina, pouring in her own support—stemming the bleeding. Easing the strain on his essence reserves.

She let out a sharp breath just behind him, fighting hard to keep the wounds from spreading. But she managed it. "Come on, Zane!" she urged.

There was the demon. Eyeing him with that same hollow curiosity. Like it was taking in every aspect of him with those blank pale eyes,

unblinking.

It smiled too-wide.

And struck again.

Zane snarled. Struck right back.

This time he tried timing it as it came for him. He came closer.

Not close enough.

He came out of that exchange with three more deep gashes lighting up his torso. It would have been five—then he saw Avery crying out, saw the air warbling in front of him, barely turning aside the last few blows. It had her bent double, hacking blood.

Still—

Warning!
Health under 75%

This thing hit very, very hard.

Zane heaved in a breath. He was already bleeding bad—his blood was turning black, freezing up, dying as it poured out of him and into that awful chilling field—his Vitality being overpowered as it left his body…

Only with Reina's support, with his heart, his massive essence stores burning constantly—could he resist.

And even still he could feel the weight of the wounds already… when he punched, he moved a little slower. Huge swathes of his chest muscles had deadened. *Were* deadening with each blow it landed.

The Monster licked its lips.

Zane clenched his teeth.

They had sent a bird to kill him.

It was already starting to piss him off. His heart was hammering fast, an immense strength coursing through his limbs—yet he could not do anything with it.

If he could get his hands on it—if he could just sink his fists into it, sink a hammer he was certain he could make his power felt. He might not match it in the level of Law. He knew he would still overwhelm it with his physicality.

Still… he bit back a growl.

He had fought birds before. Chasing had led him nowhere—he just ended up being carved up.

There was still a lot of flesh left on him. But as the demon wheeled back for a third go at him, he knew he would only weaken as things went. And it would only strengthen.

As much as he wished to… there was no time to waste chasing stupidly.

"Evan," Zane grunted. Gaze fixed on the smiling Monster.

"Mhm!" said Evan, who had charged up a blast and was trying his

best to aim—but couldn't quite seem to find an opening. The thing was too fast, too dart-y.

"Listen," said Zane.

***

"I'll bet that thing's never struck a Nascent quite like that, has it?" said the Barbarian Sage. "That's Primordial Grade for you! It'll take more than a few scratches to bring Zane down!"

It was mostly bluster. He was gripping his throne so hard it was denting the steel.

Everyone in the Observatory knew just how wide the gap between a full Fusion and a mid-Fusion was… it was not one you ought to be able to bridge. Especially not while ceding nearly a full cultivation stage worth of Levels.

But none of them had seen a caliber of Nascent Soul like Zane's either.

The Scouts and the Sage all watched, breathless, as a woman healed the big man as best she could. A girl in a hoodie tried to throw off as much damage as she could, yelling defiantly. The boy with the big sword stood there quivering, eyes squeezed shut…

"It should be enough!" growled the Sage. He cursed again as he saw Zane stagger, take two more vicious slices—and now one of his full pecs had been severed down the middle. Blood gushed indiscriminately. He was heaving in deep breaths, bleeding from a dozen gaping black scars running all across him. By the set of his jaw, by the fury he was fighting with, you would have thought he'd taken a mere flesh wound.

"It ought to be enough—if they didn't send a damned fly at him!"

Zane kept groping for it. But he was clearly slowing; every try he did came across clumsier. Stumbling a little now. His latest effort went wide left—he bellowed, fist flailing, blasting Stormfire wildly. They could all see it was way off. The demon grinned wider, darted the other way—

"*Now!*" roared Zane.

The boy's eyes snapped open. His hair began to glow a brilliant gold, the gold of the rising sun. His sword glowed too. His face was all scrunched up in determination, his bright blue eyes honed straight on the demon. He let out a cry.

All the essence he'd been charging up unleashed at once.

Wide right—straight into the demon's path. A path it had been herded straight into.

The Monster hadn't even been looking at the boy. It had been looking at Zane, at Zane's wild shot. The beam caught it straight in the chest.

Its eyes bulged. It let out a screech, went tumbling. Landed in a

crouch. Smoking. Hacking.

A shallow blackened hole sank into its chest. Dripping black blood. The boy held up his trembling sword—"Don't you hurt my friend!" he cried.

Now both sides had drawn blood.

***

Sage Burnwater was not a man given to fear.

He had been first through the breach at the Floor of Graves during the last major Jailbreak. Back in his days as an Azure general, he had faced down hundreds of Ascendant Monster hordes unflinching.

He felt fear now looking at Sage Noughtfire's face.

Noughtfire did not rant and rave when he got angry. But you could tell something was deeply wrong. Feel it in the brightness in his eyes, in the subtle stillness, the absolute control he exerted on his aura then. Like it all might explode at any moment.

A bead of sweat dripped down Burnwater's temple. If Noughtfire let loose it might wipe out a quarter of the galaxy.

"*Lan Arandor*," he breathed, eyes flashing. "You dare?!"

"Err—" said Burnwater.

"Good. Very good! So this is the game you'd like to play." The old man flicked his sleeves. "Then let me be your opponent."

Noughtfire was a mysterious, esoteric figure. Mostly keeping to himself. But those who knew—mostly Patriarchs and Ancestors—knew not to get on his bad side.

There were old legends told of Noughtfire's wrath, long lost to history. This was a man who could hold grudges for ten thousand years.

Though most of his grudges ended far faster than that. And in fashions that made Burnwater wince just to remember.

"Fetch me my staff," said Noughtfire. "This Junior is about to learn that he is not the only one who knows how to wield the System."

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255. Third Floor's End (III)

A pillar of sunlight drilled through that blizzard of a domain. Drilled deep into the Monster's chest—and it hissed, flickering back, trailing streaks of rot blood as it went.

It had gotten some good shots in on Zane too. Carved him up.

Zane felt his wounds adding up. Making a fine collection all over his body, out on garish display. Felt them like cold heavy weights hung all over him, dragging him down in flesh, in mind—he could feel them sinking cold fingers through his skull, weighing down his every thought…

He was getting near 50% Health. He had to wipe the blood off his face, his cheeks running hot with blackening blood. Where it had tried to carve out his eyes.

Still. The idea he'd slapped together was working.

Even as Zane took new wounds, he herded this Monster where he wanted it to go—made a little window. When it hit him, it opened itself to getting hit back.

Every time, Evan took full advantage.

Evan was Nascent now. So when he charged up that big beam of light—backed with the Power of Friendship and the Power of Determination spiking to inspiring heights—he made for a real threat.

Zane looked fondly at him. When Evan was needed he always found it within him.

"Keep it up," Zane said, patting him on the head.

"Mhm!" said Evan, beaming up at him.

The Monster snarled at them from a hundred paces off, smoking. Smited black down its wiry chest, furs burned clean off. Exposing raw corpse-pale flesh beneath. It was in better shape than Zane, but not by much.

He would take it.

Now it was sitting there. Still eyeing them. Not attacking anymore, after those last few double-edged exchanges.

Zane sought out its feelings, frowning.

It was beginning to feel frustrated too. When it looked at Zane it saw a wall of muscle and heat. Despite how much damage it put on Zane, he was still standing—he did not seem all that close to toppling. It could not quite believe how much of him there was. Even with its massive advantages in Law and essence, even as it fought him on home turf in its own domain…

It couldn't quite bring him down.

This was a common feeling among things that fought Zane.

It turned its gaze to him and his friends—a little tight-knit unit. Reina, healing him up. Avery, blunting its worst shots. Evan, returning fire—the one that had wounded it most, standing there shivering, frightened out of his mind, but still bravely doing all he could…

It eyed Evan an especially long time.

Something devious crossed its mind.

"*No*," growled Zane.

It leered. And lunged.

Claws flashed, slashing through the air as curving broken crescents—dark frozen slivers of some cursed moon, vicious sickles racing through the air. Carving straight for Evan's little head. Nearly as fast as light.

Evan gave a little squeak.

Zane was moving. Trying to reach him.

But Reina was already on it. She was a step ahead. She cried out, threw up a firm green shield.

Then stumbled, going pale as the first of those black crescents sank through. And shattered it. But she held it for just that split second. Enough time for Avery to throw up her own block reinforcing it, and together they barely held under the assault—

Then the demon had arrived. Claws descending, slashing over and over, crashing through their shields—

Zane was on it in a fury.

Throwing himself into the paths of the strikes just as they broke through, putting his body between them. He felt relieved when he felt the pain flare up, sink deep into him. He knew he could take it.

This time, though—Avery couldn't help block, and Reina couldn't help heal him. He felt the difference instantly. This time that claw sank so deep it grazed his heart. Had him groaning.

A split-second later he felt Reina's focus going right back to him, full of anger and fear—felt her support stemming the bleeding.

Then the Monster wheeled right around, swift as a winter wind. Flanking right around Zane, making all of them pivot behind. Then it started slashing again, and again, and again, going straight for his friends' heads.

Making them turn back in a panic. Made Reina throw up shields yet again, forced to cut off Zane's healing—even as the Monster vanished, dashing around in a sick whirlwind, striking from all angles. Gunning wildly for his friends. Flitting away the moment Zane charged close…

It wanted to strike them down first.

It could not have chosen a way to make Zane more angry.

He lunged with all his strength—but with all his wounds he still felt

horribly slow, and he was still moving through that hellish domain. It felt like every single part of him from his skills to his muscles had been struck with wasting sickness—so much slower, weaker, somehow brittle… He was forced to charge against the blizzard even as the beast rode its winds.

He kept getting closer. And closer. Not quite there. And all the while, it kept whittling his friends down, trapping them all in its clutches…

It was not in Zane's nature to panic. And yet—seeing his friends stumbling before an enemy he couldn't quite catch—

He was starting to feel the beginnings of it. A rising prickling deep in his chest—

Then, as it turned out. There was a way to get him even angrier.

Four slashes in quick succession—shields shattered. Avery gave a cry, and her distortion fields gave way too…

Then one last blow ripped through—Reina let out a gasp. Doubled over, clutching her belly, eyes wide. Blinking, stunned, at a slash opening her up straight through from the waist to the hip—streams of fresh blood gushed between her fingers.

Zane lost it.

His Asura state flared so high you could have mistaken it for its own domain.

His essence, his blood, his soul, all erupted at once, raging against that Frostbite cold—and for the first time crushing it back by virtue of sheer intensity, melting away whole swathes of it, lighting up the night in a blinding fury…

He bellowed. And charged like a mad bull.

Against most Monsters—even very strong ones—this was how Zane won.

You would be hard-pressed to find a Nascent Soul creature that could match the power coursing through his body right now.

Only here… he could not make use of it.

Even Zane would have been forced to concede—charging a creature nearly a hundred Levels above, and with a stark Law difference, and precisely the build he was weak to, alone… it was just too much.

In that moment, though. All he knew was it had hurt Reina.

He went in lunging, grasping, smashing—but his fists, strong as they were, were too clumsy, too slow, and so were his Chains—it was like trying to crush the wind.

The beast just smiled wider—Laws flaring fiercer, its domain settling in thicker—and flickered around him. Taking brutal advantage.

Zane was nearing his peak. His aura, his Asura state, flaring to match the prowess of that Law… only the domain made all the

difference. Kept the demon ahead just enough—even with Zane's most furious efforts he could not quite grab hold of it. Could not smash it, or slice it, or strangle it, no matter how fiercely he tried—could not put his great power to work.

But the Monster could ruin him.

At the end of it they both staggered back.

Zane did not have an inch of skin left unmarked.

He was heaving in thick heavy breaths, seeing blearily through just one eye—the other had swollen shut, was dammed up with black blood.

He was bloodied, gushing vast tracts of blood from every major muscle group in his body. Just a shredded, blackened waste…

Warning!
Health under 25%

His Asura State was still burning bright, though. The fury powering his body was still enough to hold back the vast plains of black frost. Enough to keep him upright—if barely…

He coughed out a pool of black, half-frozen blood, swaying on his feet. It took a great effort just to stay there.

The Monster, on the other end, was recharging too.

Zane had managed some light flesh-wounds, seared it with angry blasts—nothing substantial.

It eyed him with satisfaction. Taking in its grisly handiwork. Licked its pale lips.

It was readying itself, Zane could tell, to finish him off. It just had to take a breather. From how much energy it had spent shredding him.

Reina was on her feet now. She seemed okay, he was relieved to see—better than he feared. At least for now. Pale, wincing—one hand over her belly still. She would still need rest, need help, Zane saw, brow furrowed. Her body was much more robust after her evolution but it was still nothing like Zane's. She could not be left like this long.

Avery had tried to take the sting off as much as she could as Zane chased, took claw after claw. She was on her hands and knees, coughing up blood too, face all scrunched up… Evan was panicking a little just looking at Zane. The state of him.

"Zane?" he cried. "Are you—um—"

"'m fine," Zane slurred. Stumbling over. Woozy. Wincing. "Made... mistake."

He had lost himself. He grimaced. Just thinking about Reina gasping, doubling over as the claws shredded into her—

He felt a fresh surge of white-hot rage.

He was just turning back, growling, when Reina put a hand on his

arm. Looked him dead in the eye, even as she healed him through that touch.

"Zane," she said. "Listen to me."

He blinked at her.

"It's just a wound, that's all," she insisted. She touched his face. "I'll be fine. Don't you lose your head on me! I know you—this isn't you."

He blinked at her again, a little dumbfounded. At her. At himself.

What was he doing?

He clamped down hard on the instinct. Took a deep breath. Let it out slow. Another.

She was right.

He could not afford any more mistakes.

He could feel, sinking deep in every muscle and every bone, how much of a toll this fight had taken on him…

Only the burning in his heart kept him from keeling over.

No.

This smiling demon. It would not defeat him. Zane knew he had it within him to crush it. He just had to put it all together.

As Reina held his gaze, held her touch, the heat seemed to melt from his head.

He nodded to her. "Okay."

He thought sluggishly of all his powers. Grasping for a way—*any* way.

The Cyclone would be too slow. He would fall before he got through two revolutions. The Chains too. If he could grab hold of it—but that would be a pipe dream. And there was Wish Upon a Star, his biggest strongest blast—but could he hit this bird with it? He was not sure of that at all… and his Stars fell a little slow, too…

His brow furrowed. He had to think. He felt close—he just needed a little more time to think—he just wasn't sure.

"Talk to me," said Reina softly.

"I must grab hold of it," he said. "It is the only way."

She nodded slowly. "But getting close isn't realistic," she said. "And all of your Skills would be too slow."

Talking to most folk, Zane always had to say more than he wanted. With Reina he could say less—she didn't need explaining; she got the crux of it instantly. He nodded.

On the other side the demon was nearing ready again. Its aura was picking back up, its domain expanding…

Reina bit her lip.

"You don't need to hit it outright. You should try what you were doing before, right?" she told him. "You can go to it... or you can bring it to you."

Zane blinked.

Her words unlocked something in his brain. Somehow she knew just what he needed. She nodded, encouraging.

He turned to Evan. To Avery.

“We have one try,” said Zane. “This is what we will do.”

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256. Third Floor's End (IV)

Zane explained what he was thinking. He got lots of nods.

“We’re right behind you,” Reina assured him.

“Mhm!” said Evan.

“You’ve got this big fella!” cheered Avery.

It was nice to see. He hadn’t done so well so far this fight. But he could feel how much belief they had in him. That had not gone at all—it warmed him to see. And that feeling gave him a little extra strength.

He supposed they had been through this kind of thing a lot before. He had yet to let them down.

He would not start now.

They all turned to face the Monster again.

Its wounds had mostly healed. And though its domain wasn't as strong as it was at the start—it was plenty enough to finish the job.

Zane, meanwhile, was still pretty badly shattered. With Reina’s help, he'd made up a little healing. Crept back over 25%, if barely. His essence tank had gone down to less than half. It was about to be a lot less than even that.

His friends weren't in much better shape, firepower-wise. They were all pushing through though—he saw three determined faces.

One last effort.

The Beast’s eyes gleamed. It was nearly back to ready, just as they were.

It was time.

Zane changed out his weapons.

And called forth a power deep in his body. A vast untapped wellspring—the single greatest attack left to him…

His hammers erupted in the air. Began gathering essence at a shocking speed, flaring bright, new stars rising over a bleak land.

Twin wishes coming to life.

The creature looked to Zane now curiously. Its head was cocked farther than its neck should have allowed. It did not understand.

It could see that Zane was gathering an impressive power. A realm-shaking power even—a power that, should it hit, would cause catastrophic damage. Even to it.

But there was the same issue that plagued Zane all this time.

Zane had been one big blundering force. A show of great might—going nowhere.

It was wondering if Zane really thought he could hit it.

It was wondering if Zane was merely desperate. Or if his mind had shattered under all that damage…

It stopped caring.

Its claws unsheathed—

And it lunged for Zane's head. Streaks of spittle flying from its open leering mouth, domain flaring to life, making its every step count double, until it sped across the land, impossibly fast, as though riding its own little wormhole—

It would finish him off before he could get the shot off.

Reina rushed to block. Let out a brave cry. A shield flared up, as strong as she could muster.

Not strong enough.

Those claws smoked frost, leaked a black ice whose bite shredded harder than any mere bone or steel. A bite borne of sheer cold, a bite that killed, froze the dead and all it touched, even as it shredded… the highest form of Frostbite.

You could see the essence in Reina's shield deadening the instant it touched. Blowing out, cracking down its length—

She knew she was all that protected him now, as he charged up in this critical state. It somehow gave her extra strength. She cried out—and held under the blow…

The next claw shattered it. Reina went down gasping, coughing blood.

Zane had to grit his teeth even as rage spiked in his chest. He could not afford to lose focus.

He forced his mind on the gathering flame. Halfway lit now, rising higher and higher…

Life and death hung on these next few seconds.

Evan shouted too, and a light-beam blasted forth. But the Monster ducked it with ease.

And then Zane stood there before it. Bare.

It tore into him with relish. Slammed him with a whirlwind of claws, each more brutal than the last, cutting deeper than the last, shredding through already-ruined skin to get at the richer stuff, the vital stuff, the still-beating, still-burning parts of him—

Warning!
Health under 25%

Those claws menaced his face, his chest. Wherever they went, they found reams of hardened muscle. But Zane was softening fast, wilting—he was running out of flesh to be cut, even as he struggled to hold those hammers aloft…

He just took it. Even as his health dipped dangerously close to

Critical, as gaping black maws blotted out his sight, as claws ripped so deep he could feel the cold slicing into his heart—

He started sagging. His legs, buckling under his weight. Under the weight of all those blows. He let out a grunt.

Everything was going bleary, going numb…

The beast could tell it was getting close. At last he was going down —it struck with renewed ferocity over and over, its grin only widening —

"Hang in there big fella!" cried Avery off to the side. She really wanted to jump in—she knew she couldn't.

Zane had to face this trial alone. Tough out these last few moments, before—

A shockwave in the Astral Plane. An eruption of fierce light. Of a heat-wave so intense it blasted out like a thunderclap, making great warbling circles in air, washing out to the distant horizons… and the world was cast not in frostbite black. But Stormfire purple.

Zane's power. Come to life at last.

The Monster paused. Looked up. Squinted at the sight, frowning…

Its time was up.

He still stood. Teetering on the very brink of Critical Health—but still there.

Still heaving in deep, rattling breaths—big heart still fighting furiously against all that encroaching cold, even as his big body failed limb by limb.

Zane bellowed. A hoarse, bloody, wheezing sound—but just as fierce as ever.

And with all he had left, he tore his stars down from the sky.

The Monster looked at them nearly with contempt.

It flickered away, bleak winds wrapping around it, domain flaring —and yet again space seemed to bend around it as it moved, wrapped in its own little world—ready to skirt the blasts entirely.

A dumber beast might have kept clawing at Zane, and paid the awful price. But it still respected that power. It knew that even on the brink of death, certain creatures—especially the mighty ones—were still very dangerous.

But they also both knew, in that moment, Zane was not going to be able to land the killing blow.

All he could hope to do was to catch it in the blast radius.

And his blast would be blunted by that domain. It would not nearly do enough damage for what he needed…

It was all playing out before his bleary eyes. Seemingly in slow-motion. The Monster speeding away even as his stars bent low.

It was why he had thrown away this idea. At first.

His stars kept going. Streaking far across the sky… splitting up.

Going opposite ways.

Neither going for the Monster.

One hammer shot off into the distance—out left. The other, making for the rightward horizon. Far behind the Monster.

It took the creature a second to understand what was going on.

First it looked at Zane with mirth. There was a smugness to its shiny toothy smile. Like it thought it had broken Zane so thoroughly he couldn't even aim straight anymore.

That was a precious second wasted.

Then its eyes slowly widened. Taking in its positioning.

One hammer straying far left. Behind. The other far right. Behind. And Zane up in the very front…

It was stuck in the center of a triangle. And once those blasts went off—once those shock waves swept through, those massive forces shifting heaven and earth—

They would all head in one direction.

It locked eyes with Zane. Saw the Chains clamped tight in his bloody fists.

For the first time the smile wobbled on its face.

It ran. Dashed away at blistering pace—trying to get out of this deadly triangle, just trying to put as much distance as it could—slip out of the blast radius if it could—

It got a fair ways.

Then the stars went off.

And the blasts came crashing straight for it. It shrieked.

Walls of blinding purple lighting up the world, flooding the horizon end to end, burgeoning fast. Closing in with a furious roar, walls of immense force and energy and heat melting all they touched, blasting vast waves of pure force straight in Zane's direction—

But it was looking like the Monster had got out in time. It was still moving at blinding speeds—it was looking like it just might clear the edge of that leftmost wall…

Then Avery showed what she had been saving her strength for.

“No you don’t!” she cried.

The Stormfire curved. Deflected off an invisible bubble, swerving off path to cut the Monster right off.

There was no escape. No time to even shriek.

Zane’s blasts landed like hammer-blows.

And it went flying. Like it had been shot out of a cannon—swamped in searing Stormfire, clawing at the air, trying desperately to stabilize, flipping head over heels, trying to make use of its domain, its greatest advantage—but it was caught in a wave whose sheer magnitude was impossible to resist. A wave crashing back to shore…

Crashing right toward Zane.

Avery keeled over to the side of him, a little fried. But she had done enough.

Evan hurled one more blast just when the Monster was flexing its domain, trying to slow things down—just when it looked like it might right itself. He smashed one light-beam straight down on its face—it went careening again, flailing madly…

Zane crouched. Clenched his fists around his Chains. Heaved in one deep breath.

And lunged.

Then it was two halves of Zane blasting toward each other. His Stormfire meeting his body—crushing right down the middle.

And Zane at last clamped one big fist around the beast's soft throat.

It choked.

Instantly it started thrashing, clawing, biting— Zane felt his hand numbing, joints crackling, going black, flaring in icy pain—but his heart had never pumped so powerfully either, rushing hot vital blood to his fingers. Even as claw after claw shredded up his arm beyond recognition, shredding the last of his muscles, deadening almost all of it—

Warning!
Critical Health

Zane's grip could have been cast in iron.

He refused to let go.

The Monster shrieked.

Then Zane's Chain looped around its throat, locking tight. And it choked.

Another Chain swung heavy around its arms, a third clamped its legs, its waist—and it was well and truly stuck then.

For the first time that fight, their positions had reversed.

Now it was the helpless one.

The Monster tried scrambling out, tried kicking and wriggling—but it ran up against a wall of sheer strength, of raw power. A level of physicality it could not hope to match. Its powers were bound utterly.

Its eyes bulged, cracking red as it looked to Zane again. And Zane made one last change.

His hammers dropped off. His Chains went back to base form.

And lit up end-to-end with all the Stormfire he could muster. Searing the Monster throat-to-shin—

Prometheus Noose!

Its eyes bulged so big it looked like they were about to shoot out of its skull—it opened its mouth but no sound leaked out. There was a smoking, a crackling of flesh burning—slowly at first as fiery Laws

warred against cold ones, faster and faster as the Skill took hold, just kept tightening, flaring as Zane clamped harder and harder—at last giving his muscles something to bear down upon…

The Monster was right, it was quickly finding out. Even on his last legs there was enough power in Zane's fingers alone to kill a Nascent Soul. Much less his whole body.

He raised his fists. Saw their growing shadows looming over its quickly purpling face as it flailed for all it was worth, mouth hanging open in soundless toothless shrieks—

Zane let out a triumphant roar. And did what he did best.

Smash.

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257. Rewards & Reckonings (I)

Zane's Chains crushed in. Constricting relentlessly, splitting the Monster into twitching parts, digging into the joints, cutting off limb from limb, scalding, melting through flesh and muscle alike with a hiss like an angry python.

This creature's flesh was a lot less tough than Zane's. But it was still hardened, preserved by demonic energy, a fossil cast in permafrost. When Zane's chains bit in, they found a half-frozen sludge of black blood, long strips of lean frozen muscle, hardened to supernatural toughness by the Frostbite Law coursing through them. Preserving their shape against the very will of nature.

But they still began to crack where Zane's Chains closed in. Began to shatter, melt at the joints. Stormfire was finding its way inside. Crushing through what essence it found. And feasting on the flesh beneath.

Now the beast was starting to shudder, like the demon inside was being violently exorcised. It marshaled all its essence, flailing for all it was worth, domain dropping dense and heavy on Zane's head, and it felt like a frozen waterfall crashing over him again, beating down his back, thrusting him deep under—

But it was too late.

Zane forced a mass of essence to his fist. And forced his fist through all that icy current. Dropping right on top of the creature’s head with the force of a hammer blow.

He felt a chunk of bone shattering under his fist, heard the satisfying crunch of it—the beast screeched. Splitting up like the surface of a frozen lake.

Its domain warbled. Flickered like a light about to go out. Somehow it managed to thrash even harder, almost worming free an arm even as its joints lay half-melted.

But Zane was not about to let up.

It was time to finish the job.

He bellowed. Dropped another hammer of a fist—*BOOM!* And another and yet another, both hands wailing in a fury of fire and force, one, two, three—*CRACK, CRACK, CRACK*—

The skull caved in. The Frostbite Laws, battered to tatters, started unraveling en masse, at last, forced by sheer heat to release their

death-grips on the flesh—

Zane crushed through the freeze. And got at the matter beneath.

The Monster let out one last gasp. Its limbs locked out in full—the domain spasmed up and down its length….

And shattered. A wall of glass crashing down in the Astral Plane. The blizzard halted in an instant.

The beast went limp.

Zane's Noose flared to its maximum. Strangling through the last of its melting neck, crushing its spine under enough pressure to turn coal to diamond. He gave it one final all-out effort.

And its head lulled to one side, dropped off its body, rolled uselessly away.

Its palms sagged open.

And it was done.

Leaving Zane standing there, hot vigorous blood seeping out of every last torn-up inch of him. Heart still beating strong. Powered by Godbeast strength.

The one thing that kept him standing—slowed down.

He tilted his battered, bloodied head to the sky. And collapsed to his knees. Heaving in deep breaths. Ruined chest gently rising and falling…

The creature was flaking away. The remnants of its crushed body withering black, drifting off in the still air…

Zane looked to Reina. It was the first thing he did after the fight.

She was still on her hands and knees, shaking a little, but he could feel her life force—she would be alright, he was relieved to see. She hadn't just taken shots to the body, but also to the soul just then.

He blinked.

Thick streams of light started flowing into her. Quickly started flooding her, flooding Avery and Evan too beside her, soon growing to a torrent. Leveling them up. Healing away their wounds.

Zane looked down. They were flooding him too.

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 309 -> 319

And all that dragging weight, that bitter cold, the creeping darkness, that heavy load of pain, lighting him up on every limb—it all vanished, like that. It was quite a strange experience. It left him with a good kind of whiplash.

And Zane was whole again. He looked down and saw a plane of whole hale hearty muscle, skin without a blemish. His flesh was even glowing a little. The only evidence he had been through a fight at all were the phantom pains still stabbing through him—but even those were quickly fading.

Then it was only Zane's soul that still bore the brunt of the fight. He still felt like he had been wrung dry—like that fight had squeezed out the last of his energies. He could use a nap.

He looked around.

Soon the only thing left of that demon was a strange amulet. A gemstone hung at the end of it. The metal drawstring and the stone itself had both been charred black.

??? [???]

There was no light in it, no aura. It looked inert. Spent.

Zane wobbled back to Reina. Some color came back to her cheeks at the sight of him; she rested her head on his chest, and sighed. “I knew it,” she said simply.

“Are you okay?” said Zane, brow furrowed.

She looked up at him. “Zane, you just took a peak Nascent Soul Monster’s all-out assault! Am *I* okay?”

Zane blinked at her.

“…Yes. I’m okay,” she said. She looked half-exasperated, half-amused. “I took a flesh wound compared to that.”

Zane nodded, satisfied. Yawned.

Avery and Evan were still lying there flat, gasping.

“We did it!” cried Avery. She pumped her fist, did a little flipper kick. “Wooo!”

Evan cheered.

They all sat there blinking for a bit, processing what had just happened.

Then—

“Hey anyone want some more s’mores?” said Avery.

“Why do you have so many s’mores?” Zane asked.

***

They settled around a little campfire munching on s’mores. It took about a quarter of an hour before it hit them.

It hit Avery first.

“Heyyy,” said Avery through a mouthful of marshmallow. “Where the heck’s our rewards?”

She frowned at the sky. “Where’s that big tampering thing?”

They all thought about it for a bit. “It must be hidden from the system,” said Reina. She pointed at that gemstone the Monster left behind. She thought it must have used that as a way to sneak in, somehow.

“Can’t the System do something about it though?” said Avery. She wrinkled her nose. “Feels like it should be able to detect stuff like this. I mean—at this point it’s getting kinda silly!”

"Maybe it’s just taking a nap,” said Evan hopefully. “Maybe it’ll wake up soon?”

“Hmm,” said Zane.

Just then, red comets started streaking across the sky.

“Well at least we're getting our gifts,” grumbled Avery.

***

Lightning Constellation
Inner Reaches
Azure Flame Faction

The Lightning Constellation was the private realm of Grand Elder Noughtfire. The place where his estate and all his direct disciples made their homes—so called because the stars that made it were arranged in a lightning-bolt.

It was wrapped in so many secrets and mysteries that it had become a mythical place. So much so that many in the Factions, even Inner Faction members, doubted it even existed. Although every so often you would look up in the sky and catch a glimmer of that jagged pattern of seven stars. But blink, and it would be gone.

Grand Elder Noughtfire’s Sacred Forge lay in the heart of a star. A star at the tail end of that constellation. Burning pale white, the color of lost souls.

The Grand Elder had exited seclusion just to visit it.

At its very center, the molten core had been hollowed out. Made a workstation of cosmic scale.

Lava rivers of nine different colors flowed into it in nine different directions, down its walls, ending at the central pedestal forged of Heaven-grade Spirit Steel.

There stood Noughtfire himself. Staff raised high over a certain treasure, placed right atop the pedestal.

Eye of the Seer Cyclops [Earth (B)]

Noughtfire’s staff was pristine white gold all the way through. A singular rune had been engraved at the tip, a forbidden rune—just to engrave it would summon a backlash that killed all but the most powerful artificers.

This was not a soul weapon. But rather an artificing instrument. A staff that had belonged to a very old Ascendant of a desert civilization long-lost to the sands of time.

Noughtfire closed his eyes. Drew in deep.

And the molten flames around him responded.

Streaming up to the tip of the staff, concentrating in a singular ball of swirling molten steels, all clashing, then melding together, making a curious alloy.

Around it bands of swirling runes flared into being, runes written in a language so old it predated even Noughtfire. A language long-lost, too; a language only he knew. Uz'Kardesh, One of the most powerful scripting languages in the galaxy.

The powers Noughtfire summoned now were not those of Stormfire. But rather of another one of the most powerful Paths in the Azure Flame Faction—Laws deep on the path of Core Magma. Where Stormfire governed much of Fire's most destructive potential, Core Magma held its most potent powers of creation.

It was very unusual for an Elder to have the time or aptitude to walk more than one Path. Burnwater, standing off to one side, watching in apprehension, had devoted his whole life purely to Stormfire. It was the only way he had gotten so far.

But Sage Noughtfire had lived a very, very long time. He had forgotten more magics than most Sages ever knew.

He tapped his staff to the tip of the eye. That molten ball sank in. Vanished without a trace….

And soon a new treasure sat on the pedestal.

All-Seeing Eye (???)

"Master?" said Burnwater, sweat beading on his brow—and not from the heat. "Just to make certain. You… are not planning to wage war on the Temple of the World Tree… right?"

Noughtfire raised a brow. "No. That would be ridiculous. And unnecessary."

He picked up the eyeball between two fingers, studied it carefully. "And… messy, besides."

Noughtfire finished his inspection and nodded, satisfied. "There is a saying where I hail from—the wise man makes big ripples with small stones."

The old man paused. Sharp eyes flashing.

"The System," he intoned. "Is akin to a sleeping dragon on whose back we all live. Sometimes it is easy to believe that fallacy because this dragon has slept eons, it might never wake. It is easy to grow complacent… but I still remember a time what its fires looked like."

Noughtfire clenched his fist around the eye. "Never forget. It is

greater than any of us that live within its confines. And when it wakes, it will shake the world. Disturb it at your own peril."

When Noughtfire opened his hand again, the eyeball was gone. A notification popped up—**Your gift has been successfully delivered.**

"Observe," said Noughtfire.

He paused. "There is another saying where I hail. The wise man takes no pleasure in the ruin of his enemies…"

The faintest hint of a smile. "Alas. I fall short of wisdom."

***

Zane and his friends watched as the comet drifted down, ever-so-gently. Came to a hovering halt before them, and opened up. Revealing—

"…An eyeball?" said Avery.

They all looked at each other. Zane wondered if he was meant to eat it. He wondered how it would taste.

He was just about to reach out to grab it when it started to float of its own accord. Started to glow with an eerie golden light, pupil dilating, swiveling, staring—coming to a stop at that amulet

Green lines flickered into being.

Like they were seeing the fabric that stitched the very universe together. Lines, some thick, some thin stretching every which way—like they were getting a sudden X-ray vision into the world's inner workings…

Lines that all intersected at that amulet.

Zane had seen these lines before.

Back when he fought Eze. It was how Eze saw the world with his Touch of Death.

These were lines of Fate. Lines stretching deep into the sky—stretching far into the future and the past, stringing all of them together, ending at this precise moment.

Scenes started floating into view. Right over the amulet. They saw themselves in green film, as though looking into some distorted blurry mirror. A mirror that started going backwards, replaying the fight, moving faster and faster, blurring together—a kind of recorded rewinding…

Then it started to slow, came to stop, as a final scene floated into view. Of a Cat-kin, and a snake-lady, and an elephant-man walking together, seeing the amulet drop, cloaked, from the sky. The Cat-kin being possessed, taken over, then starting to wreck the rest of them.

The scene paused there.

Then flashed.

It was like a flashbang had gone off in the Astral Plane—green lines flooding the world, an explosion only the soul could feel—not a damaging one. More like a firecracker going off. And soon that faded

too.

"…Um?" said Evan.

And then—

Anomaly Detected—
System has detected external tampering—
SYSTEM HAS DETECTED MASSIVE TAMPERING.

The notification started flashing before their eyes.

SCENARIO 0 TAMPERING HAS BEEN DETECTED.
ENGAGING EMERGENCY PROTOCOLS.

"Um!" cried Evan.

PERPETRATORS IDENTIFIED.
METING PUNISHMENT.
PUNISHMENT LEVEL: DIVINE RETRIBUTION.

***

Evergreen Grove
World Tree Faction

Lan Arandor and Inquisitor Thaele scrambled up over the highest boughs of the World Tree, staring out into the vast twinkling expanse of space, gasping. Searching all over, trying to find the source of the disturbance—the one that had set off every last alarm in their defense systems, made their scrying glasses go blank—

It didn't take them long.

Thick storm clouds were gathering, high above. Storm clouds so black they appeared as ink-stains on the fabric of the universe, thick, burgeoning at shocking pace.

Storm clouds that pulsed with a certain kind of lightning. A lightning woven together of all seven of the Divine Lightnings—to make a perfect instrument of destruction. One that shone pure-white. One that only appeared on a singular occasion.

"How—how is this possible?!" croaked a pale Lan Arandor. "It's Heavenly Tribulation!"

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258. Rewards & Reckonings (II)

Lan Arandor and Inquisitor Thaele stared speechless at the sky. For what felt to them like an eternity.

"Is an Ancestor attempting to break through the Void?"

Lan whirled around. His eyes were bloodshot; he looked ready to tear his hair out. "Who would be mad enough to do such a thing?! Here?!"

More elves were dropping in now, sweeping down on tufts of silver wind. Eyeing the sky nervously. All Priests and High Inquisitors. All of Ascended strength.

They all did double-takes at the sight. Looking to one another. Then back at the rising storm. As if hoping if they just stared at it long enough, it might go away on its own—like this was all some horrible dream…

But it only grew and grew.

All those present were Ascended. They had all been through tribulation lightning. Most of them had barely survived. And it had been the most traumatic experience of their very long lives.

The lightning crackling above made their trials look like a static shock.

The aura radiating down was breathtaking. It was impossible to stand there and not feel a sense of utter smallness. Very few things could make immortals of their caliber feel like that—like mere ants staring up as the shadow of the boot loomed over…

"Do something!" roared Lan Arandor, spittle flying. To no-one and everyone. "Do something, damn you!"

They all looked to one another again speechless, helpless. Asking the same silent question—do what?

Just then the air ripped open. A darkness opening up—a puncture in the fabric of the realm. A tunnel through space.

And out stepped an old elf dressed in fine silks, with thick braids of white hair going down to his waist. An elf of regal bearing and stern striking features. He had a face meant for imperial coinage.

A vast aura blasted out. Glowering over all present. Dozens of gasps, all at once—

"Ancestor!" cried half the elves there—the ones who still had their wits about them. They knelt.

This was the current head of House Valoran—the Morning Dew Sage, and former Patriarch of the World Tree Faction. Zin Valoran.

One of the true pillars of the World Tree Faction. An elf who had been in deep seclusion for thousands of years for most of this Chaos Cycle. Up until this moment.

Zin did not look pleased in the slightest to be here. “What in the Nine Hells is this?” he snarled.

Before anyone could muster an answer, another void split the air.

And out poured a second aura, just as formidable. A proud old woman wielding a staff as tall as she was, pure-white, matching her ruler-straight white hair.

Ancestor Valia Rowan—former Matriarch of the World Tree Faction. Head of House Rowan, the second of the Faction’s Great Houses. She surveyed the scene with a wrinkled nose.

Then her pale gray eyes began to shine, staring up at the storm. Her hair lifted off her shoulders, hovering weightless; a pale halo flickered over her. Her eyes unfocused for an instant, seeing past the surfaces...

She turned a harsh gaze on Lan Arandor. “This Tribulation Lightning,” she said. “Is yours, Lan Arandor.”

A stunned silence. Lan went even paler, if possible.

“…Ah,” he croaked. “I… see.”

Then his cheek began to twitch. He turned on his Chief Inquisitor, trembling. But before he could get a word out—

“What have you done, Heir Arandor?!” Ancestor Zin’s aura exploded over them all. Nearly as suffocating as that of the lightning above. Promising violence.

“I—” Lan choked. Even his composure was starting to crack under all the pressure—you could see it in his trembling face. The panic started setting in, twitching down the muscles of his cheek—

He seemed to be realizing, suddenly, just how much trouble he was in.

He dropped shaking to his knees. Bowed his head.

“I have made a grievous miscalculation,” he choked out. “Honored Ancestors—if you would kindly lend me the strength to face down this trial—I, and my family, will remember this! I swear it!”

The Ancestors looked at each other. And nearly at the same time, snorted.

“You have shamed your Faction today,” snapped Valia. “This burden is yours alone to bear. You may seek help from your own Ancestor if he sees fit to save you.”

Lan’s head jerked to the skies—“Ancestor Eldrin! I beg of you—I…”

He was scrambling for words now; lightning cracked across the clouds, brighter and brighter, and angry growls of thunder rolled across the bough. “I can yet be of service! I have done right by you, all

these years—I was overzealous, perhaps, made a mistake—don't I deserve a second chance?!"

His voice was cracking near the end.

Silence.

"It appears you are on your own," said Ancestor Zin. The two Ancestors stepped back into the void—and vanished without a trace. Leaving the rest of them stranded there. Alone.

Then the screaming began.

The Inquisitors dashed away as fast as their moving techniques could carry them. The Priests were screaming, leaping off the topmost bough so hasty were they to get away.

"No," snarled Lan, staggering to his feet at last. "I refuse to accept this!"

His scream was nearly lost in the howling winds.

"What—you think to come to my home and slaughter me at my doorstep?!"

He kept roaring at the implacable Heavens. Trembling, he took out his staff.

"Inquisitor Thaele! Man the defenses!"

Then he looked around, and realized even his Chief Inquisitor had abandoned him. He was alone.

He let out a strangled cry—half rage, half frustration—"*Bastard!* Fine, then! I'll do it myself!"

He rammed his staff deep into the bough. Instantly the World Tree began to hum. Those dense layers of leaves rippling down the canopy all began to glow, began to flutter though there was no wind.

A shield blossomed high above. A new higher canopy, one made of pure essence, fielding ethereal green leaves, borne aloft on the Laws of the World Tree itself. Laws so profound they nearly touched the Laws of Life.

The storm clouds stopped swirling. Sagging so heavy they seemed about to burst. Looming so large over the tree they seemed to blot out the sky.

Then a single bolt of lightning crashed down. A perfect streak of jagged white. The manifestation of a single Law.

It was the last thing Lan Arandor saw.

That lightning crashed through that canopy shield. Shattering it with contemptuous ease—not slowing for even a moment.

Lan opened his mouth to scream.

Then he was lost in the blast. There was only light. No sound save for a high shrieking static, echoing down the breadth of the realm…

For a time that was all there was.

Then the light faded. The smoke cleared. Unveiling the extent of the destruction.

The entire upper bough of the World Tree had been roasted clean off the blackened branch.

As for the elf who had once stood there… not even his soul was left intact.

PUNISHMENT COMPLETE.

***

Observatory
Steelheart Conclave

"Eat shit!" cackled the Barbarian Sage, slapping a knee. "That's what I'm talking about! Oh, me…"

Then, begrudgingly—"Good one."

He shook his head, snorting. "That Noughtfire… he's a wily old fart, alright."

***

Lightning Constellation
Azure Flame Faction

A bolt of lightning flashed across Noughtfire's scrying glass. He took in the aftermath. Nodded. Closed his eyes.

Burnwater knew that look of quiet satisfaction.

Noughtfire did not meddle in worldly affairs. He did not even meddle in the affairs of his own Faction—there were Patriarchs who came and went having hardly exchanged more than a few polite sentences with him.

Every so often, though, some fool thought to rouse his ire. Then the world would be reminded why he had once earned the title, 'the Sage of Scorched Earth.'

"That makes for one of them," mused Noughtfire, stroking his beard. "There remains one more."

The scene shifted.

To a prison. An obsidian well dropping deep into the bowels of the realm. Golden runes lined the walls, glowing softly.

***

Superdungeon
Floor ???

Thunderclouds gathered overhead.

Gilgorath's six slitted red eyes all narrowed at once. Then went quite wide.

For a second its horror of a face went still.

Then it began to thrash, batting its many wings, struggling to break free of the chains piercing down its length. Screeching, making a

sound like steel shredding on glass.

But it was no use.

It let loose indiscriminate attacks. Furious, desperate. Blasting out nothing-Laws, pure voids that swallowed up all the lingering essence they passed, swallowing up every last particle of air, flaring out as they went… those voids were borne of high Laws indeed.

But the System was written in higher Laws still. Laws as fundamental as the forces that lit the stars, that shifted the planets in their orbits, that held particles together at the tiniest of levels.

Tribulation lightning descended.

A great blinding flash whited out the well down its full length.

There was one last awful screech.

Then there was silence at the bottom of the well.

Monster Emperor Gilgorath lay there twitching. The vast majority of its draconic body had been reduced to steaming slag, a toxic puddle mucking out the bottom of the well.

It gave one final furious wail. Its eyes sealed shut.

It was forced into a long hibernation. From which it would not wake for eons.

PUNISHMENT COMPLETE.

***

Superdungeon
Floor 77
System has detected Massive Internal Tampering
Participants have been subjected to unfair challenges
Restoring balance…
Challenge Difficulty: Impossible
Calibrating compensation…

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259. The Wyrm-King (I)

Distributing rewards…

Three balls of white light floated out in front of Reina and Avery and Evan, and faded like presents unwrapping.

In front of Avery—

Eye of the White Fox (Sky [F])

The eye of the White Fox greatly enhances the wielder's powers of perception, separating true from false. It also greatly enhances the wielder's powers to alter the perceptions of those around them. This treasure can only be given by a willing White Fox.

She nabbed it and squinted at it. The eye squinted back at her.

"Nice," said Avery.

Reina got what looked like a green pinky sculpted of dark-green vines, pulsing with earthly energies.

Finger of the World Nymph (Sky [F])

Grants a creative touch to all those who imbibe it, greatly enhancing the wielder's powers of restoration and creation. This treasure can only be given by a willing World Tree Nymph.

She turned it over, examining it from all angles, then nodded satisfied.

For Evan—

Fang of the Raijuu (Sky [F])

Grants a sharp boost to all elemental attacks for those of the Raijuu Bloodline. This Fang merges with either the body or the weapon spirit. This treasure can only be given by a willing Raijuu.

"Ooh!" gasped Evan.

Evan loved it. Though you could probably have given him a cookie and he would have liked it equally as much. Zane noticed Evan was a liker of many things.

Soon Zane's arrived too. One big ball of white light dropping out of the sky, Landing at his feet, quickly dispelling…

Two silver strips. Shot through with Titan Rhino bloodline, glowing, aura exuding that signature of an unyielding character. It

looked to be the same material roughly as the Titan Rhino Heartstring —but softer, more sinewy, and longer too…

They looked like smaller versions of the parts that had made that elf's bowstring. Zane had seen in that vision so long ago…

Achilles Tendon of the Titan Rhinoceros (Sky [F])
Grants the Titan Rhinoceros's explosive physicality to those who imbibe it. This treasure can only be given by a willing Titan Rhinoceros.

They all took some time then to take in their new treasures.

Zane was trying to figure out how Evan would get that Fang in his mouth. It was half the size of Evan's head; high-tier Lightning crackled around it.

As it turned out though, as Reina figured out pretty fast—you could just close your eyes and reach out to it. And it would absorb, merge into you.

He blinked at her.

This was earth-shattering knowledge.

They sat down and started absorbing.

He closed his eyes and saw in the Astral Plane two stark bright outlines—the strips of tendon hovering before him. He reached out to them. And… simply willed them in.

For a second he was dubious it would really work for him. Then he felt them responding; felt the Bloodline in them lighting up, striking a chord with his own... they started shivering down their lengths.

They glowed brighter for an instant. Then vanished.

His heel—around his calf—started burning.

And Zane felt something new merging into his own tendons.

He sat there cross-legged. Just waited patiently as the pain flared up. It was a pleasant kind of pain, a scalding soreness. The pain of healing, an intense growing pain radiating up his leg. Every sharp hot pinprick was another bit of him being remade. Remodeled at the tiniest of levels…

Level up!
Essence Level 319 -> 320

The tendon came with new Bloodline too. A flood of it.

Bloodline increased!
29 -> 33 drops

And a notification popped up.

First Bloodline Bottleneck has been surpassed. The wielder can now upgrade their body past the Mythic Skill cap.

The Levels—the Bloodline—kept flowing in as more of those tendons merged into him…

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 320 -> 328

And his Bloodline shot up too—

Bloodline increased!
33 -> 40 drops

So did the rest of his body. Soaking in all that new strength.

Skill evolved!
Behemoth Muscles [Mythic (E) XV -> Mythic+ (E) X]
Skill evolved!
Indomitable Hide [Mythic (E) XV -> Mythic+ (E) X]
Skill evolved!
Colossal Tendons [Mythic (E) XV > Mythic+ (E) X]

The growing-pains feeling spread down his whole body. Flooding his muscles. His skin. Until he was steaming red. Then it faded, leaving him feeling tender, raw. Like fresh steel, emerging from the forge.

He felt… strong. Like he had been tempered many times over. This body could take, and give, much more than a few hours ago.

He opened his eyes. There was one last notification.

Skill evolved!
Colossal Tendons X [Mythic+ (E) X] -> Divine Colossal Tendons III [Mythic+ (E)]

When it had all finished, he felt no difference between his own tendons and the tendons he had been gifted. The auras were the same.

His body had absorbed that brightness. It was peaking down the backs of his legs. That power had been made his own.

Maximum Godbeast threshold reached! Stage II Godbeast Body achieved.
Reach the Ascendant Stage to imbibe more Godbeast body parts.

Zane stood cautiously. He still felt tingly, tender where the merge had taken place. A burning feeling lingered.

Even at rest, his tendons were dense with Stormfire essence. The most essence-dense parts of his body outside of his heart—lit up with it, scorching even at rest…

He tried testing it with a casual stomp.

He felt his tendons flare white-hot. And erupt.

There was a pop. The sound barrier shattering almost as soon as his foot struck the ground. A blast—a crater punched deep into the frozen earth…

He blinked.

He jettisoned into the air. His head was near the clouds.

He touched down a few seconds later. Dusted himself off.

Hm.

He looked to the distant mounds of ashes, making small frozen hills. Stomped again—then he was plastered in soot and ice. He wiped himself off, looked back.

It was as though he had teleported a thousand feet. Blasted straight through that hill, left a Zane-sized hole right through the center of it.

He charged again, stomped harder this time. And the whole thing exploded on impact.

He stomped around for a bit, testing his new explosiveness, feeling like a charging bull. It was kind of fun.

***

He nabbed Evan to do a little race, as a test. He did not expect to win. Evan was a good bird. But before this latest upgrade, it would have been silly to even consider it.

He burned his Bloodline. Flared all the Stormfire in his tendon, primed it to explode…

"Ready, set, go!" cried Avery.

It turned out that in a straight-line brute charge, if Zane burned his blood and his essence, he could almost keep up with Evan. Which said quite a bit considering how much weight he was lugging along. Each step he made sounded like a meteor crashing.

It was only close in those bull-charges, though. Evan could still make like a bolt of lightning, switch up directions in a blink. Zoom all around him. Zane had to grind to a halt to make himself turn.

Still—this was a huge improvement. He was quite pleased.

He took out his Chains too for some field-testing. Dragged them along with him as he stomped about. He could rush in, smashing and strangling, force close-combat blitzes. Hound his foe relentlessly.

If he came across a bird now, he was pretty certain he could hit back. He wasn't sure if he could grab hold of them. But there would be a price to pay for bothering him—that was for sure.

He ambled happily back to his friends.

***

They soon finished taking in their treasures too. For Avery, one of her eyes changed color when she used that White Fox eye's special powers. It went back to normal right after.

"Neat, right?" she said.

She ended up on the cusp of Nascent after absorbing it. She drank a whole vial of elixir, flopped around for a bit, and ended up getting the breakthrough. She achieved peak-Profound grade.

"Awesome!" said Evan. They fist-bumped.

Reina finished absorbing her treasure too. When she tapped the ground, she could summon all sorts of greenery—whole forests would sprout at a touch. When she tapped Zane, he felt a massive surge of healing at the spot. If she had had this earlier it wouldn't have only held off that Frostbite—with Zane's powers, they would have overpowered it.

It didn't take long before she managed her Nascent breakthrough too.

He felt the fabric of the realm shivering around her as she sat there cross-legged, sweating a little, fragments of Earth- and Wood-Law swirling around her like autumn leaves. Finishing her breakthrough.

Her aura blew out of her, strong, flush with essence. He could tell it was significant just by how it shone in the Astral Plane.

It turned out to be a Heaven-Grade Nascent Soul.

She let out a relieved breath. Smiled a little, satisfied. He was happy for her.

Zane knew Reina felt she had to try to keep up with him. She had quite high standards for herself; she put lots of pressure on herself. He didn't think it was necessary, but she brushed him off. She had her own pride about it.

Neither she nor Avery quite had enough energy left to manage their Mid-Grade Concepts. But they all felt strong enough—they'd all made good leaps.

***

They moved on to the last floor.

The mood was cautiously optimistic. Now the Monster that had been meddling with their run was gone. They felt they ought to have enough to take out what confronted them.

They were also looking forward to getting out. It didn't seem so far off now. They couldn't have been in here longer than a week, but it felt a lot longer than that. Evan was really starting to miss seeing the sun.

Reina was already thinking about their plans afterwards. How she would handle her new Faction—what Zane's offers might look like.

She was in as good a mood as she had been in a while. She leaned into him, as they went along, all relaxed.

The final staircase started off in earthy tones. All stone and hard-packed dirt. But soon it started giving way to something soggier, bog-like, all purples and blacks. Hissing acids, smelling of sulfur, started pooling on the ground. The walls had an almost flesh-like consistency, Reina thought.

You have entered: Floor 75
The Wyrm-King Moraxes

Reina blinked at the name.

Soon the tunnel opened up, depositing them in a dank cavern.

The floor itself was surprisingly small—just the cavern, it looked like, if the mini-map was anything to go by.

The ground was cracked and barren, mostly, though that same vile acid still pooled here and there. Clouds of sickly green gasses hissed up from vents littering the walls. Lots of bones littered here and there—skulls of dragons, bears, what looked to be humans.

The most distinctive features were the rows of white bonelike pillars arching over their heads. Curving high, following the curves of the ceiling…

Reina was frowning at all of it. The more she saw, the deeper her frown got. Something didn't seem right about this place to her, she murmured.

Zane was on guard too. He tended to trust her instincts.

Then—

Lair lock!

This floor is a special floor: a solitary confinement floor. It contains a singular Monster.

Once the unquestioned king of the Black Wyrms, greatest of the heirs of the true dragons, having ruled for ten millennia, the Wyrm-King Moraxes decided to try for Ascension.

This proved a fatal mistake.

Moraxes, being a great talent, drew a Heavenly Tribulation of matching magnitude. Moraxes was unable to bear the burden. Its remnant, corrupted by Yin powers, remains here as a False Ascendant. Existing on the boundary between Nascent and Ascendant, living and dead…

Clearance condition:

Slay the False Ascendant:

The Remnant of the Wyrm-King

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260. The Wyrm-King (II)

The Wyrm came into being at the far end of the dank cavern.

It looked at first like a ghost, halfway corporeal. An enormously fat serpent-thing. Stuck between the Astral Plane and the physical, all wispy and translucent, its scales shimmering with a sickly glow. A ghastly light gleamed out of its eye-sockets. Thick bones stuck out through the mass. Ghostly pale flesh stuffed the space between, curving around organs that shone in the dark, as though radioactive.

Its mouth was filled with rows upon rows of sickle-like teeth. Teeth burning with Laws of the same tier as that Catkin Monster. Each tooth gleaming at the tip, smoking with corrupt power.

A domain blew out of the Monster. Everything passing through it, even the puddles on the ground, shriveled and dried on the spot. Wasting away.

Remnant of the Wyrm-king Moraxes
Essence Level 399

Its maw leaked smoky breath like a furnace. Even from this distance, Zane could feel its effect. His Red Moon Pagoda flickered up before him. He frowned.

It wasn't really breathing smoke. Rather—as soon as the air touched those laws, it turned to smoke, wilting away, leeched of power… these were Laws of Decay. Of Withering.

You could catch it like second-hand smoke too, from a distance; just a whiff of it had set his Red Moon off. It struck at the soul too. Like it tried saddling you with a sense of great feebleness, brittleness.

Zane marched out in front. Using his Red Moon to cover his friends. Burning his Blood. Letting his Axes drop heavy to his sides, clenching his fists around his Chains…

Getting in fight-ready mode.

“Ready?” said Zane.

His friends all made supportive noises behind him. He could feel Reina’s buff coming onto him, like gasoline thrown over the flames of his body. Could feel his body burning up muscle fiber by muscle fiber —raw fleshly power coming alive, all at once…

Moraxes shrieked.

A heinous, terrible noise rippling the air, rattling bones down the length of the cavern. Zane answered with his own war-cry, a furious bellow.

He stomped down once. Hard.

Then he was on the thing. Blasting off, trailing an explosion behind him. Thrust forward so fast, so quick, he felt a moment of stark whiplash.

Then its domain settled over him.

It was like he'd been thrust deep underwater. But instead of an icy lake, like with the Catkin, it felt like he'd been dropped in a vat of thick acid. Every inch of him—his very essence—started to hiss, started to smoke up…

But Reina's powers were on him, and they held strong. She gave a fierce cry. With her new Godbeast Limb, her new Heaven-grade Nascent Soul, her powers had gained a new density. And they were made even stronger by how strong her soul's connection with his own was. It wrapped him in a warm bright-green halo—held off the worst of the Domain. Fighting it to a standstill. Even Zane was surprised. She had been making big leaps lately.

It left him free to start his butchering.

He whipped out two Stormfire Slashes, full-force. And his Axes screamed forth. Finding the flesh in an instant, slashing deep, melting through thick hide, then squishy muscle—it felt like cutting through a dense jelly. Strangely resistant to him. Like its whole body was made of pure hardened essence. It did not cut like normal flesh.

And Zane could feel powerful Laws packed deep inside it, fighting his Stormfire. Lashing at it, withering it, trying to wrap it and whittle it and sink it even as it raged on through…

But Zane had smashed with too much force.

Those Laws did not prove enough. He worked harder, clenched his fists, marshaling all the might of his new body, ramming forward, forcing his way through—and his Axes came out the other side. Trailing angry purple crescent wounds carving off a sizable chunk of its body…

It shrieked.

Zane did not let it rest. With one great heave he whirled his Axes round, thrust them back in—shearing through yet more ghostly flesh, finding long stringy organs beneath—and roared in triumph.

Then Moraxes' eyes honed in on Zane. And it countered with a massive lunge.

Zane's Chains were still stuck slicing through that hulking body. He couldn't do much to pull away as its jaw unhinged. He could only stare down that lightless well of a mouth, at all those spinning gleaming teeth, that fountain of Withering Law.

He gritted his teeth. Trusted his body.

CRUNCH.

A forest of teeth speared through his skin. Digging deep into flesh—hundreds of spots all up and down his body. And injecting pure Withering.

Its powers invaded en masse—from all sides. Gunky tides ramming against his flames… the burning flared all over his body eating away at his muscles. Even as Zane wrenched and struggled, forced an arm free, roared, bashed at its head with a Stormfire Fist and was rewarded with the sound of bones shattering—

The beast would not let go. It was on him like a mad dog latched onto a bone, and yet more corruption swamped him—striking at his body, his soul—

Zane's Red Moon flared at its brightest. But it, too, was starting to tremble. Little cracks creeping in at the edges….

Zane groaned.

His health was sinking fast.

It was swamping him in Withering. Trying to ground him, even as he bashed.

In the background, Reina was still powering him up, throwing on as much healing, as much buffing as she could. And there was Evan, letting out a cry, and a beam of pure concentrated sunlight drilled straight through its head—so strong it pierced the skull, ran out the other side. The beast buckled, whole body spasming—but it kept up its death grip.

It was as though it were determined to take Zane out no matter what. Even if it meant its own life. Its domain began to intensify…

Warning!
Health under 75%

Then something strange happened.

Moraxes began to choke.

Zane was so close he could feel what it felt viscerally.

The Remnant felt like it had a brick in its mouth. Like its teeth might break if it tried to sink in anymore. And when it tried to pour in its Withering—throwing in all the essence its False Ascendant Soul could muster—it got an even greater shock.

It found inside Zane an endless sea of vitality. Swamping right back into it.

Even as Zane felt the life gushing out of him, the Serpent was starting to tremble, to struggle, choking on the sheer amount of life force flooding its way—

The Wyrm began to spasm. It was trying to swallow him, but it couldn't seem to get him down—and all the while Zane kept thrashing, roaring, smashing, hacking….

The battered Wyrm had to let go. Screeching. Flinching back.

But Zane was back on it in an instant. Bashing in new slashes—and now it had gotten him angry. His health quickly started shooting back up again. Reina's healing wrapped him warm, and just a few seconds of his assault, as the thing reeled beneath his blows, he was back over 80%. Axes flashing. Melting it in a furious rush.

The beast tried latching hold of him again, if only to stop him, desperate, jaw unhinging, trying one last lunge. Avery let out a cry and a flash of blue light struck the roof of its open mouth. Its eyes went googly, cross-eyed; it started to wobble like it had been hit by a sudden bout of dizziness. It blasted a mouthful of withering-breath at Zane—missed wide.

And Zane let it have it.

Hacking deep. Axe after Axe. Butchering it, every hack sending up fountains of hissing ectoplasm. Every hack he added a new bout of Stormfire; now a wildfire was lighting it up inside.

The doomed Wyrm-King could not even lash back. Zane came relentless.

The advantage of Zane's body showed itself in full then. It took so little time for him to reload now. Every move, every strike came explosively and when the thing reeled back he could hound it every step of the way, still raining brutal blows.

All the while, his friends kept giving strong support behind him, healing and confusing and blasting….

This thing was a strong beast. It was probably as strong as that Catkin. Its powers were outside what a Nascent Soul should have.

And yet…

It was being utterly dominated.

***

Constellation Order

The headquarters of the Constellation Order was a kingdom of a city. A collection of gold and silver spires built of Heaven-grade ore, shining under a sun that never set.

All throughout its streets, there were emblems of the moon and the sun. A giant clock tower had hands like the sun's rays.

The citizens bustling about were either Ascendants or their Nascent Soul servants.

The Inner Disciples themselves were easy to pick out, walking the streets. Decked out in knightly regalia, gold for the Sun Knights, silver for the Moon Knights.

In the highest spire of this city, there was a grand balcony overlooking it all.

On that balcony stood a tall, well-built old man, bushy of brow and bushier of beard. He wore a golden crown; the peaks were modeled

after the sun's rays.

His sky-blue eyes were focused on a scene in a golden scrying glass hung up before him. Showing one Evan Armstrong doing his very best.

The old man stroked his beard, nodding. Deep in thought.

***

Prime Oceanworld

The ocean's surface was bare for thousands of miles around, save for a single raft floating beneath the midday sun.

A white-haired girl in a tattered dress lay on it. It was hard to say how old she was; she had a timeless look to her.

A mirage shimmered up before her, showing a battle deep in the Superdungeon. It was rather hard to make out beneath the glare of the sun.

She looked up at it, wrinkled her nose at it. Looking a little miffed. She squinted, raised a hand, pinched two fingers around it. Picked up the sun, dropped it behind a cloud.

The sky darkened a few shades.

"There we go," she said brightly. Then she blinked, like she was trying to remember what she was doing. She looked back just in time to see Avery smacking the Monster with a well-timed confusion spell.

"Aww!" she said. "You go, fluffy hat girl!"

***

Scryer's Guild
Sector 17, Dragonspire Galaxy

The Scryer's Guild was located on a lonely comet circling the center of the Dragonspire Galaxy.

It was built much like the Steelheart Conclave's Observatory—the Conclave had been contracted to make it. But it was much grander; a silver pagoda rising eighty-one stories high. Each floor was rife with giant dishes and lenses; antennae poked out of it on all sides. Bits and bobs of scrying-glasses floated about around it, miniature space-stations, seeking essence from the farthest reaches of space.

This place was built not just to survey a local cluster or the Superdungeon, but to keep a watchful eye on the entire galaxy.

It had two main purposes—it published two reports each season. The first was a report on every S-Class dungeon in the Galaxy, searching for leaks, catching all possible jailbreaks before they happened.

The second was its review of all the major powers of the galaxy, in the form of rankings. The strongest Nascent Soul fighters would be ranked on the 'Mortal Scroll.' The Ascendants on the 'Earth Scroll'—

and so forth.

There was one ranking which encompassed them all, though—a ranking that graded only on potential, evaluating the best talents across all power levels in the galaxy. The ‘Rising Dragon Scroll.’

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261. The Wyrm-King (III)

The Mages of the Scryer's Guild kept an eye on every one of the Nine Great Factions. Tracking every breakthrough made by the Dragonspire Galaxy's most promising talents. Recording the result of every fight, updating the rankings in real-time.

The Guild also kept an eye on prospects in the Superdungeon, but they were usually too unproven to matter. They'd hardly begun their cultivation journeys, after all.

It was rare they would make the rankings, which only went to the Top 200. Occasionally though, a few extraordinary talents would manage it.

This cycle, to the shock of many an Elder across the Galaxy, several from a little Ur-Planet named Earth made the list.

Call it up on the scrying glass, and you'd see a few new faces. At #198, there was one Avery Lively. At #176, Emeka Eze. And at #172, Vanessa Volkova. And #138, Evan Armstrong.

The lower the rankings, the rarer the surprises—the Top 100 usually only shifted a few ranks each year, all the same names. Nearly all Core Disciples, with the occasional Inner Faction Disciple sprinkled in.

It had been millennia since the Top 100 had last admitted a pre-Integration fighter.

Until today. Up at #39—Reina's face shone on the list.

This would set off many a heated debate across the Nine Great Factions, in teahouses and ruling councils alike. It was simply unheard of.

Many a Chosen who had been long waiting their turn on the list—many a Chosen who had been bumped down a spot—were outraged. To say nothing of the powerful families that backed them.

But it was nothing in comparison to the final man who made the list.

At #3—the Prince of True Dragons, Haxorax, Core Disciple of the Azure Flame Faction. Horned face staring proud through the portrait.

#2—the Moon Reaper Lain, Core Disciple of the Guild of Endless Shadows. Eyes narrowed at the portrait behind a half-moon mask.

Both had racked up a mind-boggling number of B-rank Dungeon Clears and Monster King scalps in their few centuries of living. Both were well on their ways to becoming living legends.

But the new #1, bumping them down—a spot occupied for the first

time in living memory by a pre-Integration fighter—

An earth-man named Zane Walker. Scratching his head, as though a little befuddled he was up so high.

***

That was merely a freeze-frame shot caught by the scrying glass.

Zane, of course, was not aware of just what a ruckus he was making in the wider galaxy. He was busy finishing off the creature once known as Moraxes.

He smashed a fist through its skull, pumping in reams of Stormfire. And its head shattered, erupting in gobs of essence-bone and ectoplasm, smoking up in tongues of brilliant purple…

It slumped for the last time.

Its chunky body began to dissolve.

Panting, he looked at his hands. At all the gunky essence soaking them through. His whole body was still pumping with power, still running white-hot. He looked around, blinking. Wondering if there were more things to smash.

Skill up!
Stormfire Punch II -> III

But there was nothing.

He frowned.

Was that it?

…He was almost a little disappointed.

Oh well. He started ambling back to his friends.

Then paused. Frowning deeper.

Where were the Level-ups? The clearance notification?

Something was up.

Avery cried out, “Look out!”

Zane turned.

A ghost flickered up at the end of the cavern, quickly turning real. The image of Moraxes burgeoning into flesh, quickly solidifying… but it was no illusion. That same False Ascendant aura blasted out from it —whole and hearty.

The beast screeched.

Zane frowned.

It just respawned.

He scratched his head.

Then shrugged.

He supposed he could just bash it in again. It wasn't too hard that first time.

Reina gasped behind him. She seemed to have a realization.

“This place,” she said to him, eyes wide. “It’s the base of its power!”

Zane blinked, then focused in on it. Really paid attention to that

spawn-point. Rivers of essence were streaming up from the ground, down from the ceiling, the walls—gathering there, feeding into it, making it whole…

Reina pointed to the curving white pillars sticking out of the ground, curving into the roof.

"They're a ribcage," she said. And at the hissing pools littering the place. That was stomach acid, she said. The walls had this fleshy look to them because they were flesh.

They were fighting a Remnant. They were inside Moraxes' corpse. And it was still drawing power from the place.

A pause.

"Gross!" cried Avery.

"We're going to have to destroy its whole body," said Reina, looking serious. "The source of its power. If we want to take it out—"

Moraxes screeched. And now it had fully formed, fully solidified; it was launching itself at them again—

Zane made a snap decision.

"I will hold it off," Zane told them. "You three go destroy the body."

There was no time to question it. His friends just nodded, and went for it.

They all trusted he had this.

Zane clenched his fists. And waded straight back into the fray.

It was a very messy, bloody, exploding next few minutes.

Lots of roaring, smashing, slashing, tearing, biting. At one point Zane had two hands pressed against its clamping jaws, forcing it wide open, feeling those rippling jaw-muscles slowly ripping under the strength of his arms. Sinking an Axe down its throat, ramming in a string of explosions—

It choked. Slammed him against the wall with enough force to bring down a mountain, head-first. Doused his face with in a tide of corruption. He grunted, a bit dazed.

It sank giant teeth into his belly. He snarled, bashing furiously, forcing it back off him. Back and forth they went, Zane wrestling with this False Ascendant beast, throwing it against the wall, wrecking it chunk by chunk; it ramming Zane against the ground with a Monstrous strength, trying to drown him in that acid domain—

Explosions rattled down the length of the place. Both of them were burning up. One in Stormfire, one in Withering—taking off big chunks of each other with each vicious outburst.

Warning!
Health under 75%

Zane took his Chains, wrapped them around the beast's throat,

down its fleshy body. A second serpent coiling around the first—and dropped his Anchor of Gods Skill. Even as he wrestled the great beast down.

The beast *CLANGED* against the ground—and sank deep into its own corpse. Shrieking. Suddenly it could barely move. Held down by what felt to it like an immovable, infinite weight…

Its fangs kept ripping into him. Even as Zane squeezed on a Prometheus Noose.

Warning!
Health under 50%

He could feel the Withering taking its toll. But he could also see his Chain sinking through that fat neck, severing the chunks of its freight-train spine, melting through vital nerves, seeing its eyes pop, even as he felt his whole body going numb, the lower half of him fading out as those black Laws sank their claws deep into him—

Warning!
Health under 25%

Almost at the same time, Zane gave a final roar. Squeezed with all his might. And his Chains melted through the last of its spine.

Its great head popped off its body, choking, hissing, then lolling… and the whole thing went still.

Skill up!
Prometheus Noose III -> IV

And Zane defeated the Monster for the second time.

He lay there flat on his back, breathing heavy, steaming with Withering powers. He blinked, sat up, and found half his left arm had shrunken. Gone black. The whole lower half of his torso. One of his quads looked shriveled and rotted. He was having quite a bit of trouble moving. A stabbing hot pain was flaring up all over his muscles, fiercer and fiercer…

He blinked.

It was always a little surprising how much he could ignore. He could put aside a lot in the heat of the moment. But once it was over, he started feeling the weight of the damage—and it was quite a heavy thing. Even for him. He grunted, tried working up to his knees…

Reina was with him in a flash. She had dashed over, got him in a tight embrace, put soft healing hands on his most ruined parts, brow furrowed—and his dead tissues were growing flush again, coming alive at startling speed….

"I'm here," she assured him. Zane nodded.

As that Moraxes flickered up again on the other side, rebuilding.

Zane was too.

Reina's healing worked doubly strong with him—it not only worked the withered places, clearing out those lingering Laws, healing the flesh. It also strengthened Zane's own powers. Made the tiny flames of Stormfire burning at each wound, burning in new thick strands of muscle, flare fiercer…

Zane looked around, taking stock of the scene.

Most of those rib-pillars had shattered, toppled over. They weren't glowing anymore. Their power had been broken. Evan was still busy poking big holes up the beast's midsection—the ceiling was rife with them now. Pillars of light streamed down through. The whole thing—walls to floor—was shivering slightly, now that Zane looked at it. Fissures snaking down its length, scars in the skin.

Big chunks of the place had gone dead. Reina said her healing powers were like an antidote to it—when she threw them at the beast's Withering powers, they dimmed.

Avery came over in the meantime.

"I'm better off helping here," she announced. She squinted at her umbrella. She was not making much progress destroying things. Apparently umbrellas were bad at destroying. She looked a little miffed about it.

Zane nodded.

He was nearly at 75% by the time Moraxes came by for round three. This time, Reina stayed behind and supported him, just in case. Avery was there too, baffling it with stunners. Zane clenched his fists, set his jaw, waded back in. And did his thing.

In Zane's opinion, it would not have stood much of a chance against him regardless. But with the three of them together… it was not even close.

Zane still felt good by the time he finished wrecking it.

"How's it going," he said to Evan.

"Almost done!" Evan cried.

Almost all those big ribs were knocked down by then. Moraxes' corpse was riddled with craters.

Zane eyeballed Moraxes as it respawned. He figured he had some time to help out.

He took out his hammers and started smashing too.

He blasted great big holes in the ceiling, toppled those last few ribs. The Wyrm-King howled—but it was still respawning; there was little it could do. Zane could sense the connection to its corpse weakening—could sense the corpse weakening as a whole, the Law, the essence fading from its tissues, going darker the more he wrecked.

He sent a Stormfire Smash rippling down its belly, chaining explosions. Each one left a smoking blackened maw. Another Smash

and the whole place began to shake violently; big chunks of that sickly flesh-ceiling started to bow in, break off…

The ghost of Moraxes flickered.

Zane got a very bad feeling all of a sudden. Like it was all going to blow.

He scooped up Reina in one arm, who made a little surprised noise. Scooped up Avery in another, who yelped. Dashed for Evan, who gave a squeak. And smothered them all in a big hug.

It did not actually blow, as it turned out. Lots of flesh crashed down—sagged—dissolved. And the corpse cracked open. Tearing up at its rotten seams, bowing out. Fading away....

Zane blinked. Looked up. Warm winds touched his face. Two suns shone high above. Around him stretched desert sands, on and on—a few cacti lay here and there, some bones, but that was all.

Gently, he let his friends go. Looked around. Was it…?

Sure enough—

The Remnant of the Wyrm-King has been defeated!
The final floor has been cleared.
Superdungeon run complete!

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262. Deliberations

Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
Essence Level 328 -> 336

The air in front of them began to shimmer. At first, they thought it was just a heat wave. Then it cracked open, swirling cold whites and blues into the warm yellow landscape.

A portal. And through it, they could vaguely see a warbling image: a mountain. A bright-blue sky above with just one sun.

It was the peak they'd left from. Everest. His friends all gasped when they saw it.

It was home.

Air gushed out from it, cold and refreshing, washing over them all, dusting them with specks of snow, wrestling with the torrid winds….

It was finally hitting Zane—they'd made it.

…It didn't seem to register fully. It felt like they had been in here ages. Like they had been leveling and fighting non-stop, floor after floor….

It would be nice to get a chance to rest. Do other things.

But first, a notification.

Distributing final rewards…
Calculating run difficulty…
Grade determined: Impossible
Distributing rewards…

The boxes popped up one by one, in front of each of them.

100 Credits in the System Store [Sky (C)]
The System Store unlocks for each wielder at Ascendant. It offers rare and obscure items often unavailable in the local galactic cluster. It also includes custom services such as Spirit Weapon upgrades and boosted soul fatigue recovery.

A silver chest dropped into the sands. Zane cracked it and found the inside bigger than the outside. It was a vault full of stacks of fist-sized gold coins. Neat.

Then, right after—

Heavenly Tribulation Seal [Sky (C)]

A treasure granted by the System in honor of extraordinary deeds. It greatly boosts the wielder's chances of surviving their next Heavenly Tribulation.

Zane wasn't sure what to make of it all—he looked to Reina, who seemed to think they were the sort of thing that would pay off down the line. They sounded pretty important to her.

That all done, he and his friends moved on. Stepped through the portal, and made their way into the light.

Home at last.

***

Steelheart Conclave
Inner Faction

The Barbarian Sage waved his hands wildly. "—first in the history of the Rising Dragon Scroll!" he said proudly.

He stood in the middle of a vast round chamber, a temple of heavy iron. A single shaft of sunlight shone down on him. The rest of the place was mostly cast in darkness. He could barely make out the faces around him.

This was a meeting of the Steelheart Council—an assembly of the most powerful figures in the Faction. All sat around on big wrought-iron thrones surrounding a big wrought-iron table.

Each was a grand Elder, or an Ancestor, or a Patriarch. There were dwarves, and men, and half-giants—but they were all well-built, hefty with muscle. Each had an aura to match.

The Barbarian Sage didn't feel much pressure, though. He was also one of these folk, after all, and he was pretty sure he could take any of them in a fight.

He put up a projection. Began cheerfully playing a little highlight reel he had snipped together of the best moments of Zane's run, stopping to point out any time Zane did anything even a little interesting.

He finished grinning. "And that is why, esteemed council-members, I seek to give Zane Walker the max contract! That is—our maximum offer, plus immediate status as a Core Chosen—along with all the benefits it offers. I would also take him as my Direct Disciple. So. What say you?"

Silence in the chamber.

The Barbarian Sage scratched at his throat. He had worn his dress robes for this occasion—broken it out of deep storage for the first time in ten thousand years. He wanted to show he meant business. They were rather itchy, though, and he was fairly certain he had put them on backwards. Ah, well.

One elder spoke out first. Lady Ironfingers—though most of her was hidden in shadow, you could see her famous fingers steepled in the vague light. Each was wrapped in careful thick gauze, like sheathed swords.

She nodded. “You’ve brought an impressive one, Yoren. I can see it.”

“And yet…” another gruff voice spoke up. It was Grand Elder Bane, a scruffy old dwarf-Elder on the other side of the room.

“Some would say the Scrying Guild has been too hasty! Does he truly warrant that rank? The potential is there, obviously—but he is still a pre-Integration whelp! He's hardly taken a step on the long road of cultivation.”

The Barbarian Sage frowned. Incidentally, Elder Bane’s #1 disciple, who had held Rank #17 on the Rising Dragon Scroll for some centuries now, had been pushed down to #18 as a result of it. He had a sneaking suspicion that had something to do with Bane’s grumpiness.

“It *is* asking a great deal,” said a deep third voice, accompanied by a snort of flame. Grand Elder Karakas, a full-blooded Nethersteel Drake—though he still retained his tail in human-form. It swished behind him as he spoke.

“Let us not forget,” said Karakas. “He has taken Yoren’s own Bloodline! Yoren has some stake in this. Bane is correct. Zane Walker is the most impressive Nascent Soul man I have ever seen—I will grant that. But he is still a Nascent Soul man. I say it is too early.”

The Barbarian Sage frowned deeper. Karakas had never liked him. They had something of a rivalry back in their youths—probably because the Barbarian Sage kept pummeling him every time they fought in the finals of the End-of-Year Tourney. The Sage would’ve liked to do it here and now, for old times’ sake. But he had a feeling it would do little to change the old lizard’s mind.

“I have come to a decision.”

A voice deeper than the rest boomed across the chamber, leaving silence in its wake.

It came from the head of the table. The biggest chair there, for the biggest fellow. The Bedrock Golem, Patriarch Steelheart.

They all listened up.

“It is true that this is an unprecedented situation,” said the Patriarch.

“The odds are against you, Yoren. It is known that the attrition rate is over ninety-nine percent between power levels. This is especially true of great talents. A talent at one level rarely remains one as they rise. And we would only offer a maximum contract for a candidate who stands a good chance of becoming a backbone of the Faction. That attrition rate… should rule out any Nascent fighter. Especially one of extraordinary potential, who will draw an extraordinary Heavenly Tribulation. The odds are too steep.”

The Barbarian Sage opened his mouth to protest.

“However!” continued the Patriarch. “In my estimation… the Scryer’s Guild was correct in their assessment. Zane Walker will face a devastating Tribulation, but that Seal should aid him greatly. He faces many a bottleneck ahead besides—but even so… in soul, in will, in body. He is a package like none we have ever seen. That is worth taking a chance on.”

He waved a brick of a hand.

“You are authorized to make the maximum offer!” said the Patriarch. “Bring Zane Walker to the Steelheart Conclave.”

The Barbarian Sage grinned wide. “Will do!”

He was already thinking up what to offer. He would have to drown Zane in Bloodline treasures, for certain—essence treasures too. All kinds of rare metals. Zane was a growing boy—he would need to be fed very well. The Sage chuckled. He’d have to make a trip down to see some old friends in the Titan Heartlands—see if he could bum a few more Titan Rhino parts too, perhaps…

***

Azure Flame Faction
Inner Reaches

The ruling council of the Azure Flame Faction met at the heart of an ever-erupting supervolcano. It took up nearly half the surface of the molten planet it stood on—and its temperatures were akin to those at the hearts of stars.

You would have to brave soul-melting eruptions just to enter the chamber. Only the strongest of the Azure Flame Faction could do that.

Grand Elders and Ancestors and Patriarch alike sat on a circle of molten-rock thrones.

Patriarch Azure Flame sat on the largest one, at the very center. He made for an imposing figure most times—thick of beard, burly of frame, his massive dragon-kin horns curving over locks the color of coal.

Today he looked mildly uncomfortable. Shifting in his seat a little.

There were nine thrones here. But only eight would attend these Councils, usually. One was nearly always empty. That belonged to

Grand Elder Noughtfire.

Noughtfire had not been seen in this chamber for half a Chaos Cycle, in fact.

But now he stood before them in person. He had called this meeting. Most of the powers there had an inkling what it was about.

Noughtfire was not looking at anyone else. He leveled his gaze squarely at Patriarch Azure Flame, who was looking less comfortable by the second.

"I plan to offer all the Faction is legally permitted to Zane Walker," said Noughtfire. "As you are the Faction Leader, I thought it proper to let you know."

"I… see," said the Patriarch. A pause. "Now, Elder Noughtfire—I do not mean to question your discernment, of course—but it remains a rather large risk. Perhaps this merits some discussion—"

"No need," said Noughtfire casually. "I will offer the resources myself. And I will take him on as my Direct Disciple. You simply need to authorize his position within the Faction as an official Core Chosen. Ah—and the incentive ladder."

"Incentive ladder?" said the Patriarch.

"Indeed," said Noughtfire, unfurling a scroll. "This Chaos Cycle is fast reaching its peak. Our best scryers estimate the first of the Monster Waves will strike our Galaxy within the next fifty years… I plan to have him ready for the frontline by then."

An even more stunned silence. One of the Grand Elders made a choking sound.

"He would have to be elevated at minimum two hundred Levels—and two full Law Tiers—for that," said the Patriarch slowly.

"Indeed."

"In… fifty years."

"That is correct."

The Grand Elders, the Patriarch, the Ancestors all looked to one another. Noughtfire could guess what they were thinking. They thought, as usual, that he had gone utterly mad. It was a little amusing to see.

Then they inspected the scroll—and there were a lot more choking sounds.

"It is a simple list," said Noughtfire. "Achieve a challenge by a certain date, and the Faction will offer him a reward. It may be to reach a certain power Level, or comprehend a certain Concept. Win the End-of-Year Tourney. Slay a Named Monster. And so on."

It was hard to tell if the shock was coming from the 'goals' Noughtfire had set, or the rewards he was proposing.

He had thought there would be a lot more outrage about those rewards; some of them even Noughtfire would not have the power to

grant. Unique items only the Faction treasury would have. Then again—the challenges likely seemed impossible to begin with.

One such reward, for instance, would come after challenge #6—"Defeat Rising Dragon Scroll #3, Core Disciple Haxorax, in single combat. In two years' time."

Noughtfire closed the scroll. Raised a brow.

"So. Is that all?"

"Err—" said the Patriarch.

"Excellent," said Noughtfire, and left.

There was a silence.

Then the council exploded in shouts.

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263. Grace Period (I)

It was time to head back to Earth. Zane and friends were laden with treasure. A wealth of Weapon Souls, for one—but they'd also picked up tons of random treasures too. Blocks of quality Spirit Steel ore, golden apples, essence-rich honeys. Some Law Fruit and the like too. And with his soul fatigue waning, Zane was just about ready to upgrade his Vital Organs.

There was lots to do in the way of upgrades. But they missed Earth—it was quickly decided they could finish things up there. The journey was over.

Zane felt a warm burst of pride in his chest thinking of each one of them, at the progress they had all made. He tried to communicate this to them by giving Evan and Avery head-pats, and Reina a kiss. He was pretty sure they got the idea.

They went back through the portal in good spirits.

Home at last.

***

The Superdungeon had ended.

Emeka Eze was breathing heavily, streaks of steaming purple blood spattered down his gauntlets, a zombie's head still crushed in one fist.

He looked around.

The scene had changed.

It was no longer an infernal graveyard. A rocky plateau stretched all around him, fading into clear blue sky. Giant reddish rocks dotted the landscape, streaked with white. Trees like big fuzzy umbrellas dotted the yellow grass, going on and on…

It was home.

He blinked.

The zombie head dropped slowly to the ground. The Concepts on his gauntlet winked out.

His elite warriors gasped and shouted all around him, like they could hardly believe they were back. Then they started to cheer.

Eze looked to the skies in silence. Then smiled, just a little.

"Well done," he said quietly, to no-one in particular.

***

Vanessa Volkova blinked, looked around. Staff still thrust forward, gales of sub-zero winds blasting out, blanketing the world with Nascent powers… but rather than strike a mossy underground cave,

her attack crashed over barren tundra. A few nearby Giant Polar Bears yawned, looked up at her befuddled.

She looked back, just as befuddled.

"…It's over?" she whispered.

Beside her, Cain Hastings sank to his knees. Shook his fists at the skies, mustache trembling.

"It's over!" he cried, and burst into manly tears.

***

All over the world, across gates strewn throughout Earth—across South America and Asia and Oceania, even the poles—the heroes of Earth returned.

Almost all of them were high-Core. Looking haggard and relieved at once. And after that initial shock had faded, one question lingered on all their minds.

Who had done it? Who had been the one to make it through?

But like Eze they all knew, deep-down, even before the notification popped up to confirm it. They had seen it happen time and time again. The people of Earth knew that when you needed him most, Zane Walker would not fail.

Then another System notification popped up. Before every living person on Earth.

The Integration is now complete.

Welcome, Planet Earth, to the Universe. Congratulations.

The grace period has begun.

Earth shall retain System protections for the next 30 days. In that time, no high-tier Dungeons, Monster Waves, or rogue Named Monsters will be permitted to pass into this sector.

In 10 days' time, external Factions will be permitted to offer contracts to Earth's inhabitants. It is advised to take their offers within the grace period. Joining a Faction means that Faction offers resources to help fend off external threats.

Only Earth-grade Beacons can receive offers from external Factions.

For many, the notifications brought on a new set of concerns.

But those could wait for later.

There were 10 days yet before the next phase of things were set to begin, it seemed...

There was time to celebrate.

***

"They're home, ladies and gentlemen!" crowed Tyler, anchor newscaster for the World Ranker Network—Earth's #1 broadcast station. Looking very shiny with his waxed blond hair and spiffy bowtie.

“After weeks enduring unimaginable trials—trials which tested their limits—Earth’s finest have returned!”

A set of stills flashed across Channel 1’s projection.

A gasping Cristina Dos Santos and her hunters in torn bloody furs, stumbling out of a mossy portal gate. It took them a few moments to recognize the hundred-foot-tall trees of her home Faction, deep in the Amazon jungle. Then the cheering showered down from skyscraper treehouses, from the vine-bridges up above, followed by waves of flower-petals… she sank to her knees, like she could hardly believe her eyes.

The scene shifted to show a very tall lithe man, South Korea’s #1, Jin Seo, speeding through the skies—his usually silky-straight hair in a shaggy mess. His eyes were a little red.

He touched down in the rolling hills of his hometown, looking like he had just woken up from a dream. He got a little color back in his face when he saw two little girls running over to hug him at full speed —“It’s the first time they’ve seen dad in weeks!” said Tyler.

“Aww! Isn’t that wonderful?” said Becca, on the other line. “These past few days it's like Earth has been one big party everywhere you look!”

The image changed— the Spitfire Monk hoisted on the backs of his fellow monks, laughing and drinking from a gourd, sloshing wine all over himself. A flood of red robes parading down a thousand-odd temple steps. Firecrackers lit the air.

It changed again to show sandstone megaliths emptied out into broad sunbaked streets. Explosions of color puffing up, bursts of pastel smoke, wine-corks flying everywhere… Emeka Eze himself watched from a high balcony, separated from it all.

“Not a fan of all the noise and the touching, it seems,” chuckled Tyler.

“But look—he’s smiling!” said Becca. “Even the Touch of Death can’t help but feel it.”

The scene changed to the Norwegian coastline, where a hefty Jarl Erik was laughing heartily, trying to drink his almost-as-hefty lieutenants under a giant wood log of a table. In the distance steam rose over giant lake hot-springs; fireworks exploded overhead…

“Everywhere you see, though,” said Tyler. “You’ll hear them raising their glasses to one man—”

“Three cheers for the Savage Sage!” bellowed Jarl Erik, as though on cue. The Vikings around him all cheered, clanking their tankards. Becca laughed.

“Especially on the west coast—his own territory…”

Scenes popped up of the beaches of the San Diego sub-Faction—stuffed full of boisterous crowds. Crowds spilling onto oceanfront

villas, spilling out onto docked party-galleons, drinking alien spiced wines to their hearts' content. The festivities even spilled out into the sea—giant turtles floated in the distance. Teams played volleyball on their backs with twenty-foot-tall magic bubbles.

Chants kept popping up—"Savage Sage! Savage Sage!"

The scenes kept shifting to different parts of the Luminous Faction—chunks of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascades floated into view. Tribes in furs roasted truck-sized legs of fatty meat around bonfires. An ice sculpture had gone up of Zane, looking quite dashing and handsome. In the festivities one of the revelers chucked a snowball too hard, which blasted the statue square in the face. The statue keeled over. When they put it back upright they found his nose had been taken clean off.

The scene shifted to show the tribe's leader, a little wrinkly old man. "We decided not to repair the damage to the statue's face," said the old man, nodding wisely. "It is now even more true to the spirit of Zane.'"

The scene shifted one last time, resolving to a live image.

"It's been a wild few days!" said Becca, breathless and flushed. "Things are finally starting to settle a little…"

She was standing in what seemed to be a city square. A place with warm medieval aesthetics—all wood and cobble, but set on skyscrapers that would've dwarfed any pre-Integration city. There was something at once quaint yet magnificent to the place.

A fountain so big it could've been a geyser roared up at the center of the square; children were laughing, splashing through it. Lush oaks lined the sides, leaves fluttering softly in the breeze. It was a lovely summer's day.

"I'm reporting to you live just outside Luminous Faction headquarters!" said Becca. "It's the first summit of world leaders since the Superdungeon's conclusion…"

Scenes flickered up. One of Reina meeting with a long line of World Rankers in a well-lit wood hall. Among them were Vanessa Volkova in a light elegant dress, the French mage Maxime Legrande in a fluffy royal-purple robe, Yuki the Sky Painter in casual streetwear, D'Angelo Hall in a business suit, a delegation of Pacific Islanders, and on and on…

There was lots of courtesies. Reina accepted it all, smiling, laughing, nodding, making the right small-talk, looking quite comfortable—the embodiment of grace. Zane, meanwhile, blinked next to her. He was mostly just a big body standing there, looking slightly awkward, like he was not sure quite what to do with his arms and legs. He let her do most of the talking.

Most of the top Rankers paid their respects to him too, one by one.

A few of the lesser World Rankers openly stared, like they were looking at some mythical beast. Zane scratched his head.

"Later, a select council of top Rankers met to discuss what Earth's future would look like now that the crisis had passed."

The scene shifted again to show a grand hall, sunlight streaking through a glass roof. Reina stood at a podium, giving a speech. There was lots of nodding.

"They're all keeping a close eye on what comes next! Nothing's been finalized— they anticipate huge shifts to come when the Great Factions make their offers… but as one of the few reporters given access to this meeting, I can share some exclusive news! They're all very committed to protecting Earth no matter what happens."

"Well, that sure is a relief," chuckled Tyler.

"Zane was quite clear on this," continued Becca. "He seems to be taking up his mantle as Earth's protector—and he's taking it quite seriously! I got a chance to snag an exclusive interview with him about it. When asked why, he shrugged and said he didn't want to leave his friends. And, I quote, 'I like it here.' Then he walked away."

"Ah!" said Tyler. A pause. "…Well, fair enough!"

"The day closed out with a private seminar on the mechanics of the Nascent Soul, held by Zane, with Faction Head Reina as a translator. I interviewed an anonymous World Ranker who said it involved lots of sand-castle-making."

"What?" said Tyler.

"I think it's code for something," said Becca. "Regardless—whatever it was, it seemed to work out splendidly! Most of the top Rankers I spoke to seemed quite keen to start working on their breakthroughs… suffice it to say—Earth's future is looking bright!"

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For More...

Thanks for reading Savage Awakening 3! It was a blast to write. I'm aiming to release Book 4 around mid-December.

I'm currently writing it on my Patreon. There you'll find over 50,000 words of extra content, with a chapter added 5 days a week. Check it out!

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